

Encountering Spiritual Tourism in Kathmandu

A Qualitative Study of Eight Nepali Emerging Adults

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Sammendrag

Spirituell turisme er et økende fenomen som kan sees over hele verden. Mange har forsket på skjæringspunkter mellom religion og turisme, men færre har fokusert på *vertssamfunnet* i disse møtene. Mange vestlige turister ankommer Katmandu for å delta på «retreats» og for å lære yoga og meditasjon. Majoriteten av disse er særlig interesserte i ulike former for buddhistisk praksis og lære. I denne oppgaven har jeg studert hvordan unge voksne nepalesere ser på denne trenden, hvor mye kontakt som oppstår mellom dem og turistene, og hvorvidt det er tegn på at spirituell turisme kan påvirke dem. Gjennom intervju med åtte nepalesere og deltakende observasjon blant vestlige spirituelle turister, har jeg kunnet registrere og identifisere måter sistnevnte kan påvirke religiøse eller spirituelle trender blant unge nepalesere.

Datamaterialet viser at lite tyder på at spirituell turisme har hatt en merkbar påvirkning på informantenes religiøse eller spirituelle praksis. Det var derimot mulig å registrere områder hvor spirituell turisme har en påvirkning på informantenes idéer omkring religion og spiritualitet. For eksempel har tilgjengeligheten av yoga- og meditasjonssentre økt betraktelig, og alle informantene som ikke allerede var aktive i disse, uttrykte sterke ønsker om å bli det. Unge voksne er i en fase i livet hvor de er nødt til å ta mange avgjørende beslutninger, også med tanke på religion. Måten Katmandu i økende grad tilpasser seg miljøet av spirituelle turister, gjør at dette kan bli en faktor i avgjørelser blant unge nepalesere. Buddhisme opplever en vekst i Nepal, og dette kan komme av en økt oppmerksomhet rundt buddhistisk praksis og lære, noe spirituelle turister i stor grad bidrar til. Mitt ønske med denne oppgaven har vært å synliggjøre vertssamfunnets aktive rolle i møter med turister, og presenterer med dette åtte unge nepaleseres synspunkt og historie.

Chapter 1: Creating a research project

Inspiration, research questions, and previous research

After having spent several months in Nepal in the year of 2012, the hospitality and friendliness shown by Nepalis¹ towards tourists kept catching my attention. Encounters between local Nepalis and tourists caused me to reflect on how the former views the latter. Noticing the large numbers of Western tourists arriving in Nepal to go on retreats or stay in areas near yoga and meditation centres, I started questioning how the local community, and young Nepalis in particular, viewed these visitors and their practices. How extensive are encounters between hosts and visitors, and how, if at all, could these encounters have an impact on the way the host community regard these ‘spiritual practices’, such as yoga and meditation? Reading up on this topic, I came to realise that this was largely an unexplored area within research regarding the intersection between religion and tourism. A fieldwork conducted by Peter Moran in the early 1990s, presents a study of Western Buddhists in the area of Boudhanath (from here on referred to as ‘Boudha’), and their encounters with Tibetan Buddhism. As a part of this study, Moran provides the reader with some interesting remarks on the ways in which Western Buddhists are viewed by the locals. Moran asks questions about how these encounters can have an impact on the ways in which local, young Tibetans identify as Buddhists.²

Between June and October in 2014, I conducted a fieldwork in Kathmandu, with the intention of focusing on the host community, and more specifically, the young population of Kathmandu, and the ways in which they have encountered spiritual tourism. With this thesis, I want to contribute to this field with knowledge about these encounters.

The *first*, *second* and *third* chapter will provide the reader with the necessary context for following the data and analysis that will be presented in chapters *four*, *five*, and *six*. The *seventh* and final chapter will present a summary of the results and conclude the analysis. All chapters presenting data and analysis will include a short summary in the end of each chapter to make sure the key elements from each chapter are clear. Relevant theories and research will be duly presented as an integrated part of the text as a whole, rather than as a separate part without including the necessary context provided by the data material collected during fieldwork.

¹ I will be following the examples of LeVine and Gellner, where both the people of Nepal and the main spoken language will be referred to as ‘Nepali’. LeVine & Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, xi.

² Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 157–195.

1.1 Research questions

I started this project with the main research question being:

‘How can encounters between spiritual tourists and emerging adults in Kathmandu have an impact on religious trends among the latter?’

During fieldwork and the following processing of the data material, what became increasingly interesting was the analysis of how extensive these encounters actually were, and how ‘emerging adults’ in Kathmandu observed these tourists. This process resulted in these following questions, and will be processed and answered using the data from interviews and from observation material collected from Kathmandu:

- I. How are Western spiritual tourists viewed by emerging adults in Kathmandu?
- II. How extensive is the contact zone³ between emerging adults and Western spiritual tourists in Kathmandu?
- III. Can spiritual tourism have an impact on religious or spiritual trends among Nepali emerging adults in Kathmandu?

1.2 Key concepts and terms

Some terms require further examination before being put to use. These are concepts, key terms that will need clarification, and other explanations about conditions in Kathmandu aimed to guide the reader through this text:

1.2.1 ‘Emerging adults’

Those who constitute the group of informants are eight Nepalis, whom are all ‘emerging adults’, aged between early twenties to early thirties. I chose to sample informants among this age group because these have seen and registered changes in Kathmandu the latest decade or two as the capital has become increasingly globalised, and are currently having to make decisions on the threshold of adulthood. These informants will be properly introduced in the chapter on methodology. Jensen and Arnett have defined *adolescence* as people being around the ages of 10–18, while *emerging adults* are between 18 and 29.⁴ Two of my informants were just past the age of thirty, and had thus slipped passed Jensen’s and Arnett’s category. They were however all in similar life stages, establishing their lives more or less separate

³ A term first utilised by Mary Louise Pratt for social places and spaces, where disparate cultures meet and try to come to terms with each other. (Oxford Reference, “Contact Zone”, 14.05.15, <http://goo.gl/n2pL3r>)

⁴ Jensen and Arnett, “Going Global”, 473.

from their families' traditions. Two of the informants had very recently had their first child. Reading this age category as less depended on the number of years one has lived, and more as a category for a certain stage of life, I still decided to count all my informants as part of this category. When presenting the informants' religious practice, more attention will be given to this category and their role in an increasingly globalising Kathmandu.

1.2.2. The spiritual and the tourist

The terms 'spiritual' and 'religion' are rather difficult to define for all who are studying topics related to either of these. The ways in which they are used in different cultures and contexts vary greatly and pose problems when used for research. Even the seemingly less challenging term 'tourist' has left me searching for other and more suitable terms to use in this thesis. People often associate negative elements with the word 'tourist' and many Westerners I met preferred to be called by different names, such as 'traveller' or 'pilgrim'. 'Spiritual tourist' is however already an established term in the field, and using Alex Norman's definition, this is the term that will be utilised throughout this thesis.⁵

Interest in the term *spirituality* has grown immensely among those studying religion and religious themes in recent years. The term is also becoming much more common outside the academic study of religion, as the number of people who identify as 'spiritual but not religious' is increasing.⁶ The question is then: What are people excluding from the term 'spirituality' that they are including in their association with 'religion'? Peter van der Veer argues that 'spirituality' suggests more than it actually defines, and that this vagueness and conceptual unclarity is what has made it so useful to many people.⁷ He engages the term critically and writes that it is the very elusiveness of the concept which allows it to be used across such a vast variety of disciplines and by people with such varying motives for using it.⁸ He traces this use of the term back to the influential Indian reformer Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), and his role in the World Parliament of Religions of 1893 in Chicago.⁹ 'Spiritual activities' such as yoga and meditation later gained a solid foothold in Western countries after the 1960s, when amongst many others The Beatles travelled to India. Since then, India has been regarded as the very epitome of spiritual destinations for Westerners.¹⁰

⁵ '[A] tourist who undertakes a spiritual practice or seeks spiritual progression in the course of their travels, usually with the intention of gaining 'spiritual benefit'. Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, 17.

⁶ Pew Research Center, "Nones on the rise".

⁷ Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, 7.

⁸ Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, 61–62.

⁹ Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, 48–49.

¹⁰ Norman, *Spiritual Tourism*, 140.

Yoga in particular was included in therapy centres offering alternative treatments in western countries,¹¹ and since then, its popularity has increased until the present day, when yoga centres have become commonplace in all modern cities worldwide. Van der Veer writes that spirituality, in some historical instances, has taken up a space left vacant after a marginalisation of institutionalised religion. ‘Spirituality’ escapes the confines of institutionalised religion and is thus a term functional for more cross-culturally variable ideas.¹² Peter Beyer suggests that concepts often termed ‘spirituality’ are forms of religion that cannot be said to have a clear identity as a particular religion at all.¹³ These, he argues, usually appear as non-organised or non-institutional forms, as parts of a pluralization process. Still, talking about such a process in terms of a *substitution*, claiming that spirituality is ‘taking over’ the previous realms of religion, is probably misleading, Beyer argues. This development is much more evident in some regions than in others, and in some cases the process is not exhibited at all.¹⁴

Conceptual differences between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ have no doubt constituted challenges during the work with this thesis, but I have attempted to use the terms which the informants themselves used when describing their own religious or spiritual practice or concepts. The interviews were all conducted in English, so they have not had to go through a process of translation before being presented in this thesis. Throughout the thesis, as consistently as practically possible, I will utilise the terms preferred by the informant in the interviews, and I write ‘religion’ when discussing Hinduism and Buddhism in Nepal in general.

1.3 Previous research

There has been an increased academic interest in the areas of *tourism* and host community, but the interest has so far mostly been centred on *economic* impacts. ‘Spiritual tourism’ is a term which has been used mainly when studying the spiritual *tourist* and the journeys these spiritual tourists make. Popular media has also picked up on this phenomenon, and has started referring to this as ‘spiritual tourism’, making it an idea also well known outside of academia.¹⁵ Tourism has been called ‘an element of community enrichment, thanks to the

¹¹ Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, 179.

¹² Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, 8.

¹³ Beyer, *Religion in the Context of Globalization*, 14.

¹⁴ Beyer, *Religion in the Context of Globalization*, 14.

¹⁵ See, for instance: Bowler, “How Spiritual Tourism Might Change the World”

meeting of different cultures.’¹⁶ There can be much potential in such ‘meetings’, and its extent is only expected to expand the next decades. The UNTWO estimates that there will be approximately 1,8 billion international arrivals worldwide by 2030.¹⁷

1.3.1 Interest in spiritual tourism

Most of the research devoted to investigating the relationship between tourism and its host community has been conducted within the fields of economics and marketing. This is rather unsurprising, as tourism has an enormous role in the world’s total money flow, and employs millions worldwide. Spiritual tourism is receiving more attention as the phenomenon spreads, and in November 2013, the first International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development was held in Vietnam.¹⁸ The conference held by UNWTO¹⁹ was thus introduced in the conference brochure:

Recognizing the growth of spiritual tourism, with up to 330 million pilgrims visiting the world’s key religious sites every year, the 1st International Conference on Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development focused on sustainability and the responsible management of natural and cultural assets as a means to promote the socio-economic development of host communities and societies worldwide.²⁰

Their idea, described in the conference brochure, is that ‘[t]he interaction spurred by such encounters has the potential to evoke profound spiritual experiences and transformational spiritual growth.’²¹ With regards to this ‘transformational spiritual growth’, researchers such as Alex Norman, Michael Stausberg, Timothy J. Dallen, and Daniel H. Olsen have looked at the *tourist* in relation to these journeys, and elements in their encounters with host communities.

1.3.2 Encounters

Tourists interacting with locals will normally be communicating with service providers in the tourism sector, but this is still an encounter with the potential of informal interreligious

¹⁶ Zaei & Zaei, “The Impact of Tourism Industry on Host Communities”, 12.

¹⁷ UNWTO, “Tourism and Sustainability”

¹⁸ World Tourism Organization UNWTO, “Viet Nam hosts 1st International Conference on Spiritual Tourism”

¹⁹ “The United Nations World Tourism Organization is the United Nations agency responsible for the promotion of responsible, sustainable and universally accessible tourism.” (description from the organisation’s website unwto.org)

²⁰ World Tourism Organization UNWTO, “Viet Nam hosts 1st International Conference on Spiritual Tourism”

²¹ Brochure from conference: “International Conference: Spiritual Tourism for Sustainable Development”

learning.²² Tourism is one of the ways many people encounter other religions²³ and thus an area where people can impact one another within these encounters. As far as I am aware, there have previously been no qualitative studies focusing on encounters between spiritual tourism and individuals in a host community.

The study closest to the present one, is the aforementioned study by Moran. This study is based on his fieldwork in Boudha, and has been crucial for decisions made both during the fieldwork and the analysis process of this thesis. He conducted the majority of his fieldwork during the years 1993–1994, and much has probably changed in those twenty years until today. It is my opinion that these changes mostly consist of a further escalation of the situation as it looked in '93 and '94. His reflections concerning how Western Buddhists in Boudha could have an impact on young Tibetans' religious practice were of particular interest, and he encourages further research on this topic.²⁴ He suggests in his conclusion that possibly due to encounters with Western Buddhists in Boudha, young Tibetan Buddhists exhibited more 'self-reflection and critical inquiry into practices and doctrines that their parents took for granted, together with an increased engagement with contemporary English-language Buddhist texts.'²⁵ He argues that it is possible that a greater involvement with meditative practices could appear in the future among lay Tibetans.²⁶

1.3.3 Research in Nepal

John Whelpton's *A History of Nepal* from 2005 has been considered one of the most important books for those studying Nepal. It is a detailed, yet rather short, account of 300 years of political and cultural change and development, leading up to the contemporary situation. This has been a useful guide during the preparations for fieldwork and the analysis process. But as with any country undergoing rapid changes, an updated historical account of more recent history in Nepal is already overdue.

The researcher's approach to the object of study will always be of central importance. Gregory Price Grieve has contributed with an intriguing suggestion on how to study religion in Nepal, using the model of a *mandala*.²⁷ Through explaining the steps of how one can paint a mandala, he means to show the reader an alternative method of how one can study a

²² Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 139.

²³ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 139.

²⁴ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 195.

²⁵ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 191.

²⁶ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 192.

²⁷ A *mandala* is a Hindu or Buddhist graphic cosmological image. It is usually patterned as a circle divided into different sections. Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 4.

religion. He emphasises the importance of not relying entirely on scriptural accounts of religion and provides alternative approaches to learning more about everyday lived religion (what he names *prosaic religion*) in Nepal. He explains his motivation for trying such an approach through not wishing to become ‘a tool of the dominant class’.²⁸

Attempting to understand other people’s worlds is not what makes one an orientalist. (...) one cannot assume that people’s actions stem from either passivity or ignorance. We need to approach people as creative and improvisational agents in a world that they themselves created.²⁹

The book as a medium of knowledge is far from a neutral one, Grieve argues. The medium of the book has tended to structure knowledge not only to benefit Western conditions, but also the educated, male elite.³⁰ Knowledge from *books* has ‘tended to privilege the linguistic, discursive, and the cognitized over the visceral and tacit.’³¹ Having utilised participant observation and interviews as methods, I hope to have achieved a better understanding of Nepali conditions, than knowledge previously adapted to suit the medium of the book. Eric Cohen likewise emphasises that ‘host community’ may not be an adequate term to describe people who live in areas visited by tourists. Cohen reminds the reader that ‘locals, even in less touristically developed areas are not just passive objects of manipulation by outside forces (...), but seek in various and often conflicting ways to influence the direction in which local tourism should develop.’³² I thus want to emphasise that when writing ‘host community’ throughout this thesis, I am referring to the dynamic, complex, and active local community, who live in the area where tourists visit, rather than an isolated and homogenous group of people who receives influence from the outside.

After the earthquake that dramatically shook Nepal the 25th of April, and the following aftershocks, I have been able to get in contact with six of the eight informants. I still have no information about how Ram and Prem have managed through this disaster. I can only hope they and their families are safe and sheltered.

²⁸ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 12.

²⁹ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 16.

³⁰ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 73.

³¹ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 73–74.

³² Cohen, “Tourism and the Host Community in Less Developed Areas”, 3.

Chapter 2: Historical and contemporary context in Nepal

Surprisingly little research has been devoted to Nepal, despite its 26 million inhabitants, approximately ninety three languages, and as many ethnicities and cultural traditions.³³ According to the latest census from 2011, 81 % identify with Hinduism and 9 % with Buddhism. There are good reasons for being critical of these numbers, which is something I will return to, but they give the reader an idea of the general situation of religious identities.³⁴ Recent political conflicts have led to the contemporary situation where the democratically chosen government is unable to agree on a constitution for their nation. In this chapter I will present the most salient and relevant historical moments in Nepal's history leading to the current religious situation. By looking into how the nation opened up to touristic visitors as late as in 1951 and how spiritual tourists from Western countries are utilising facilities in Kathmandu, I hope to lay a foundation for the coming analysis of the relationship between spiritual tourists and the group of informants.

2.1 Nepal's religious scene in a historical perspective

Many Nepalis take great pride in emphasising how Hinduism and Buddhism have always coexisted peacefully in Nepal. The two religious systems share a long history in Nepal, and this is particularly visible in Kathmandu. David Gellner is careful with naming the situation in Kathmandu 'syncretism', as the encounters between the two systems have been more complex than having just blended together.³⁵ In a historical perspective, a consequence of this complex religious situation is that individuals have had considerable availability of *choice* in the precise manner in which they have articulated and acted out their relationship with Buddhism and Hinduism.³⁶

King Prithivi Narayan Shah united different states, ethnicities, languages and cultures under one kingdom in 1769, and the boundaries he established remained largely unchanged until the year of 1814, when the area was reduced to more or less what constitutes today's borders.³⁷ King Prithivi proclaimed himself *hindupati* (lord of the Hindus) and used Hindu symbolism to unify the various traditions existing in Nepal.³⁸ The kings of Nepal has until the

³³ National Population and Housing Census 2011 (National report)

³⁴ National Population and Housing Census 2011 (National report)

³⁵ Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism*, 325–326.

³⁶ Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism*, 329.

³⁷ Von Einsiedel, *Nepal in transition*, 38.

³⁸ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 57.

day the last one abdicated, been viewed by the public as an *avatar*³⁹ of the Hindu god Vishnu, one of the main deities among Hindus in Nepal.⁴⁰ The last king of Nepal abdicated in 2008 after several dramatic incidents during the two latest decades⁴¹, and the current president, Ram Baran Yadav, is not considered to have the same religious role.

Nepal's art and architecture bear witness to a mix of traditions and are visibly shaped by both Hindu and Buddhist heritage. Siddhartha Gautama, who was later to become the Buddha, was born in Lumbini on the southern plains of Nepal around 500 years B.C.E.⁴² Buddhists participate in Hindu festivals and vice versa, and gods and goddesses often have two different names – what the Buddhists call them, and what the Hindus call them⁴³. It is common amongst Hindus to claim that they are both Hindu and Buddhist, as most view Buddhism as a 'branch' of the Hindu religion, emphasising how Buddha is considered to be the eighth avatar of the Hindu god Vishnu.⁴⁴ In comparison, this took a different turn in India when B. R. Ambedkar, an immensely important character for the reintroduction of Buddhism in India in the 1950's, added this extra vow to the traditional 'Five Precepts' when converting to Buddhism: 'I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the Incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this propaganda as mischievous and false.'⁴⁵ This had little influence in Nepal, where nobody I have spoken to have ever had a problem with Buddha being considered as one of Vishnu's incarnations. Many in fact even emphasise this fact as an example of the religious harmony claimed to exist in Nepal.

There are mainly two traditions of Mahayana Buddhism practiced in Nepal. These are the Tibetan or *Vajrayana* Buddhism and the *Newari* Buddhism. The Newari tradition is a ritualistic and tantric form of Mahayana⁴⁶, though these traditions largely overlap. A Theravada movement gained foothold as well, first among the Newars in the 1930s, before it spread and reached other parts of Nepal.⁴⁷ Despite the claim made by many Nepalis that there have been no religious conflicts in Nepal, many Nepali and Tibetan Buddhists have felt discriminated by the government, as even the then updated 1990 Constitution rendered Nepal

³⁹ An avatar is considered to be a manifestation or incarnation of a deity on earth. Jacobsen, *Buddhism*, 101.

⁴⁰ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 59.

⁴¹ The most dramatic of which were the 'royal massacre' in June, 2001 when the Crown Prince Dipendra shot and killed the king, queen, and seven other members of the royal family before apparently committing suicide. Whelpton, *A History of Nepal*, xvi and 211–212.

⁴² Jacobsen, *Buddhism*, 20–21.

⁴³ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 53.

⁴⁴ LeVine, Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, 32.

⁴⁵ LeVine, Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, 10.

⁴⁶ LeVine, Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, 12.

⁴⁷ LeVine, Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, 24–55

a Hindu nation.⁴⁸ Nepal was recognised as a multi-lingual and multi-ethnic country, but *not* multi-religious, as it was still termed a ‘Hindu and Constitutional monarchical kingdom’.⁴⁹

2.2 Opening the gates to the world

1951 was the year when all that had been was about to change. The autocratic Rana regime fell apart after 103 years of reign in 1951⁵⁰ and until then, only a few exceptions had been made with letting foreigners into the country. All travelling and transportation was done by foot as there were no roads, and only after 1951 did Nepal welcome embassies to establish in Kathmandu. Only then did the international diplomatic community start referring to Nepal as an independent state⁵¹. After 1951, the road network was established and expanded, telephone lines introduced and the literacy rate of the population rose drastically.⁵² The opening of the borders to Nepal coincided neatly with the 1960s fascination with the ‘Exotic East’ in Western countries, and slowly, Western spiritual tourists started arriving.⁵³

Influence from abroad and changing domestic politics have since had a significant impact on several aspects of living in Nepal. Toffin writes that the period from 1950 to 2012 has been ‘the fastest era of change in Nepal’s history’.⁵⁴ Toffin published his book in 2013, and there is no reason to believe this process to have stagnated. Today, foreign influence in Nepal is impossible to ignore. Most schools, also those in rural areas, demand that all children speak English in school, both in class and during breaks. Large posters promoting education in foreign countries cover street signs in Kathmandu and Pokhara, the two largest cities in Nepal, and Nepali programs on TV are constantly being interrupted by English commercials selling loans for studies abroad. Western music is played on the radio and Western movies are shown in cinemas. Nepal’s popularity as a tourist destination is also growing, with many coming to trek in the Himalayas, volunteer in rural areas, or search for spiritual experiences. There is still a great gap between urban and rural areas in terms of development. There is limited access to electricity, and even though water filters have become more common, clean drinking water is not always accessible.

⁴⁸ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 65.

⁴⁹ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 61.

⁵⁰ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 26.

⁵¹ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 26-27.

⁵² Whelpton, *The History of Nepal*, 200.

⁵³ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 43.

⁵⁴ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 23.

2.3 Nepal today – united with difference

According to the census from 2011, 81,3 % of the population identifies as ‘Hindu’, while 9 % identifies with Buddhism, when having to tick only one option in the census.⁵⁵ After discussing this with many Nepalis, I argue that asking them to choose *one option* is an unnatural way of measuring religiosity in Nepal. In addition to this, the large group of Tibetan exiles living in Nepal are not included in the census,⁵⁶ excluding large parts of Tibetan Buddhists from the statistics. Caste (*jat* in Nepali), tribes, ethnicities and languages must also be taken into account when talking of the complex society which constitutes Nepal. There is not one correct approach to utilising these terms in Nepal,⁵⁷ it is very complex, and becoming increasingly so: Four of my informants are Newars, but none of them speak the Newari language,⁵⁸ like most of their parents do. LeVine and Gellner claim that the amount of Newars who only speak Nepali and only have either passive or no understanding of the Newari language, probably are an absolute majority outside Kathmandu.⁵⁹ This scenario, they claim, is increasing rapidly among younger generations also inside Kathmandu,⁶⁰ as can also be demonstrated by my informants. Their families perform different religious rituals than those of other castes/ethnicities, but my informants did not have enough knowledge about this to describe *how* it was different. This is a clear indicator of how fast the society is changing, and how some emerging adults have not prioritised learning their parents’ traditions, but are increasingly creating their own.

2.4 Spiritual tourism in Kathmandu

When entering a webpage promoting Nepal as a tourist destination, elements of religious and spiritual aspects are among the first ones to appear on the screen.⁶¹ When discussing spiritual tourism with the informant Sujana, whom will be properly introduced in the chapter on methodology, he said:

Yes, I think most of the people that come to Nepal, they’re either here for adventure purposes.

Fifty percent. And fifty percent come to discover the spiritual parts of themselves, because they

⁵⁵ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 68, and National Population and Housing Census 2011 (National report).

⁵⁶ Exiled Tibetans are normally not registered at all in Nepal, and only given asylum when entering India. Nepal’s relationship with China is tense, and statistics about Tibetans in Nepal is very difficult to find. See for instance: Sharma, “Nepal targets Tibetan exiles, under pressure from China: Rights body”.

⁵⁷ Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism*, 253–254.

⁵⁸ The Newari language is called *nepal basha* and is Tibeto-Burman in origin, and influenced by Sanskrit and other Indian languages (Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism*, 252).

⁵⁹ LeVine, Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, 31.

⁶⁰ LeVine, Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, 31.

⁶¹ See, for instance: “visitnepal.com” and “welcomenepal.com”.

have always heard of Nepal as being a very spiritual and very religious country, you know, surrounded by mountains and Gods. And yeah, I mean, we are not Venice, we are not Paris, you know, people don't come here for vacations with their families, they come here for a retreat, you know, to find themselves.

Nepalis seem to be very much aware of the fact that Nepal is being promoted by emphasising its religious and spiritual aspects, and none seemed to have any trouble with this; on the contrary, several informants expressed pride in that this is part of what draws people to Nepal. Small shops offering souvenirs to tourists are making money selling statues of gods and goddesses, prayer wheels and prayer beads. Qualified and non-qualified guides flock around tourists to tell them stories and myths surrounding the many holy sites of Kathmandu, and many Nepali families visiting these sites will sprinkle flowers in the tourist's hair for good luck. Hotels and shops are commonly named after well-known gods or other religious terms that are known amongst tourists. New centres for meditation, yoga, retreats and seminars on Buddhism or other spiritual activities are opening every year, especially in Kathmandu and Pokhara. Most are placed right in the main tourist areas, such as Thamel and Boudha, and are mainly visited by Western tourists. These centres are often promoted through posters of Western-looking women in Western-looking gym wear. I have had conversations with several teachers working in these studios, and every one of them have claimed that their practice is a *non-religious* one, despite there being life-sized Buddha figures, lotus flower paintings or quotes from religious figures on the walls. They *have* however claimed that what they teach is a *spiritual* practice.

Studying the much used 'Lonely Planet' guide book for Nepal, you would see that among the 'Top 15 Experiences', seven are directly linked to religious festivals or religious sights.⁶² Among the 'popular activities' mentioned, meditation, yoga, and retreat-centres rank high. Reading The Lonely Planet guide books can be a guide not only to which hotel or restaurant to visit, but also to what topics tourists visiting Nepal mainly have been interested in reading about.⁶³ In an article mainly concerning the Spiritual churches of New Orleans, Claude F. Jacobs argues that the tourist guidebook 'has become the most influential in the construction of the tourist gaze and the interpretation of various sites'.⁶⁴ In the same way as souvenirs,

⁶² Mayhew, Brown, Holden, "The Lonely Planet Nepal" 9th Edition, 2012.

⁶³ For a case study on presentations of religion in guidebooks, see Siv Ellen Kraft's "Religion and Spirituality in Lonely Planet's *India*".

⁶⁴ Jacobs, "Folk for whom?", 312.

guidebooks can create destinations, often as parts of conscious market strategies to promote one place or site before another, establishing them on the tourist itinerary.⁶⁵

The front cover of the *Lonely Planet Nepal* is a photograph of the spectacular white dome of the Boudhanath stupa, where four sets of eyes are looking to all cardinal directions. The minority group of Tibetan Buddhists get to be attributed the front page of a book sold on all continents, which perhaps is not too puzzling, considering the fact that the majority of spiritual tourists coming to Nepal are there to practice some form of Buddhism.⁶⁶ Buddhism has received much attention in the West the latest decades, and perhaps people from Western countries feel more familiar with Buddhism than with Hinduism, because of its larger visibility in the spiritual and commercial market.

The main group of tourists visiting Nepal are however not from Western countries, but from neighbouring India, and these will often wish to visit Hindu sites throughout Nepal.⁶⁷ In all the major religious sites, especially in Kathmandu, tourists pay an entrance fee, except if they are from one of the SAARC-countries.⁶⁸ Tourists from Western countries pay the full entrance fee, normally ranging from around 500–1000 NPR, making Western tourists visiting religious sites a more generous source of income than their Indian co-travellers. They could therefore provide a more profitable marketing target for those who earn their living from the tourism industry.⁶⁹

2.4.1 What Western spiritual tourists do

Most of the spiritual tourists whom I were in contact with during the fieldwork were young Westerners going on short term yoga retreats and meditated in centres around Boudha. Many were also students in the Buddhist colleges in Boudha, perhaps excluding them from the ‘spiritual tourist’ definition, as they were not only there for ‘leisure’, one of the main aspects of the idea of *the tourist*. Long term expats, who were the main group of informants for Moran, were more difficult getting in contact with, as most were older than I and we had few mutual acquaintances, and these seemed to take their practice very seriously. Most spiritual tourists I encountered were mostly interested in Buddhism, and described Hinduism as being

⁶⁵ Stausberg, *Religion and tourism*, 202.

⁶⁶ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 119.

⁶⁷ Statistics of tourists visiting Nepal can be found on data.opennepal.net, Sector Tourism.

⁶⁸ SAARC is short for South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation. This association includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. (saarc-sec.org)

⁶⁹ Per 02.02.2015, 1000 NPR transfer to 78 NOK or 10, 12 USD, a substantial amount compared to an average working salary in Nepal.

less available to them. Moran also describes how Westerners would emphasise the exclusivism of Hinduism and compare it with Buddhism's universality.⁷⁰

The exact number of centres offering spiritual services to tourists is hard to define, as they all offer different exercises, some more informally than others. Among the most visited yoga centres in Kathmandu are the *Pranamaya Yoga* centres, which are located in three sites in Kathmandu, as well as in Pokhara, and the *Himalayan Int'l Yoga and Research academy*. On the webpage of the latter, it says:

Our center has been running since 2008 with New designed and structured Two Eco Houses called "Shiva" and "Buddha", Typical Nepali Style House named "Kailash Bungalow", Safari Cottage Tents named "Bliss", "Harmony", "Tranquillity", and "Wisdom" all nestled in 30,000 sq. feet of lush green gardens of vegetable, fruits and herbs.[sic]⁷¹

Their way of marketing their site clearly demonstrates a 'pick and mix-approach'.⁷² This becomes apparent with the houses being named after both one of the most important Hindu deity *and* the Buddha, as well as the health and relaxation discourse that is present in the choices made naming the cottage tents. In addition to these centres there are several others, particularly in Thamel, the main tourist area, some of which are listed in various internet sites providing those who are interested with an overview of spiritual services.⁷³ These provide visitors with courses in yoga, meditation, pilates, alternative health treatments such as *reiki* and *aura readings*, and variations of these. One of the instructors in a centre located in Boudha said that many Western students of Buddhism in the nearby colleges would come to his classes, but that the services he offered had little to do with Buddhism, but were all *spiritual* exercises. He pointed to the stupa outside and told me that what the people walking around the stupa were doing,⁷⁴ was not Buddhism to him, but rather they were 'blind rituals'. To him, science, philosophy, and meditation were the essential parts of his Buddhist life. This centre had originally only been located closer to Thamel, but they had opened this centre in Boudha in addition, because this was where the majority of his customers stayed when they were in Kathmandu, according to the instructor.⁷⁵ Several Buddhist monasteries in Kathmandu also offer both short and long term retreats for foreigners, and when visiting

⁷⁰ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 173.

⁷¹ Yogainnepal.com, "Himalayan Int'l Yoga Academy and Research Center (HIYA –RC)"

⁷² Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 89.

⁷³ See, for instance: visitnepal.com/spiritual

⁷⁴ It is common to see monks, nuns, and laypeople doing prostrations and spin prayer wheels whilst walking clockwise around the stupa.

⁷⁵ This data was provided by two separate informal conversations with this one instructor, medio August.

monasteries one can observe signs encouraging visitors not to disturb those staying in the retreat areas.



Photo 1: Nora Børø. The Boudhanath Stupa in the centre of the Boudha area

Perhaps more easily noticed, if one is not actively searching for signs of spiritual services, are the shops, restaurants and hotels named after well-known religious concepts or figures, such as ‘Nirvana Restaurant’ or ‘Buddha café’. Many spiritual tourists are searching for somewhere to stay to practice exercises which require silent and serene surroundings, and it is common among these to seek outside of Kathmandu for their spiritual practice. These are commonly located closer to the Himalayas and in more remote village areas, where many centres have opened retreats. Many of these still have their main office in Kathmandu and provide services with pick-ups from there.

Most spiritual tourists I communicated with had been in contact with one or several leaders, or ‘teachers’, and they would exchange and compare experiences with these. Many of those who had stayed in monasteries, would get ‘initiated’ during a private ceremony, where a string of their hair would be cut of, and they were given a ‘Buddhist name’. This is brought up

as curious also by Moran, whom had witnessed the same thing, and writes that this ritual does not really have an equivalent among Tibetan lay people.⁷⁶

2.5 Other influential factors

Even though I will be analysing the relationship between Nepali emerging adults and spiritual tourism as practiced by Western visitors in this theses, I also want to consider how other elements play important roles in shaping the informants' religious situation. Stausberg argues that 'tourism affects religion as much as religions are affected by other contemporary realities such as global migratory flows and the media'.⁷⁷ These 'other contemporary realities' must also be considered before separating spiritual tourism from the greater context:

- Many Nepalis study abroad, to return later with their new habits and cultures fresh in mind. People from rural areas who have previously had no means of receiving an education, are now given the opportunity to travel, mostly via agencies employing them to work in the Gulf. Many of those returning from these work camps are contributing to an increasing number of mosques opening in both the capital and in more unexpected rural areas. Several of my informants had studied abroad and claimed that it has had much influence on how they now had come to view their lives in Nepal.
- Christian missionaries established and started working in Nepal in the eighteenth century, and have gained some influence in the Nepali religious scene⁷⁸. In the census from 2011, 1,4 % or 375 699 people, have stated that they are Christians.⁷⁹ Several of the informants expressed their frustration with Christian churches opening in Nepal, claiming they were paying people to convert to their faith.
- Education is reaching out to more people, including women and lower castes, who have often been discriminated against, and thus been denied access to such institutions. More knowledge about the outside world might cause one to ask more questions surrounding one's own practice, be it religion or other parts of the daily life. The informants all emphasised increased access to education as the most important change in Nepal, when comparing their lives with their parents'.
- Modern media has contributed to broadcasting religion in a different way. New religious movements, such as those revolving around gurus, are being broadcasted on

⁷⁶ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 145.

⁷⁷ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 15.

⁷⁸ Gellner, "The Emergence of Conversion in a Hindu-Buddhist Polytypy", 765.

⁷⁹ National Population and Housing Census 2011 (National report).

TV and radio without demanding anything of the listener.⁸⁰ Media broadcasting pictures and news clips from religious festival celebrations all over Nepal are making remote parts more connected to the rest, and to what is happening in the capital. One of the informants said that when a TV channel started broadcasting religious sessions with meditation courses in the mornings, he eagerly participated, but then lost interest after some time.

⁸⁰ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 129.

Chapter 3: Fieldwork in Kathmandu

Methodology, informants, and ethical issues

All data presented in this thesis was collected through interviews and participant observation conducted between June and October 2014, in various locations in the Kathmandu Valley. In this chapter I will present the methods used, why I chose these, and how they served their purpose. I will also present my informants, ethical issues and challenges that came up during the fieldwork. Choosing Kathmandu as the fieldwork location came naturally, as it is the only city in Nepal with an international airport, hence the majority of Western tourists have to arrive in Nepal via Kathmandu. It is by far the largest market for spiritual tourism in Nepal as of yet.

3.1 Creating a working platform in Kathmandu

I interviewed nine Nepali informants whereof two of the interviews were conducted with two informants present simultaneously. One of these informants I chose to exclude from the finished data material, as little useful data was produced during this interview, both caused by communication issues and the informant's lack of interest in discussing the topic in question.

Yoga and meditation centres, and seminars on Buddhist philosophy are visited by many, and I tried to keep up to date with what events and which centres spiritual tourists used. Through doing this, I witnessed first-hand how tourists, both long-term expats and short-term travellers with spiritual motivations, would seek out different types of activities. This assisted me in registering how many or how few Nepalis participated in some of these activities. This was particularly useful to understand examples the informants made, and to form a foundation for a general knowledge of the tourism business in Kathmandu. By arriving in Kathmandu with an open mind to what I would focus on in the encounters between spiritual tourists and Nepalis, I was making use of an inductive approach. This ensures that the researcher is keeping an open mind about the broader research field throughout the process.⁸¹

3.2 Participant observation in Kathmandu

Participant observation became a natural part of the daily life living in Boudha. Where an introduction was natural, I presented myself and my field of research. This was the case in smaller meditation groups, and in yoga classes where the participants were made to interact with each other. I participated in various courses offered to tourists, and especially in Boudha.

⁸¹ Bryman, *Social research methods*, 12.

These were courses of yoga, meditation, alternative health treatments, and seminars. I also visited Buddhist monasteries both inside Kathmandu and elsewhere. Several of these monasteries offered retreats and courses in Buddhism for tourists, or opportunities for volunteer work teaching the young monks. Much time was spent in various religious sites, observing who went there and how much interaction there were between tourists and locals.

I also spent time in cafés, where one cannot help but notice large or small groups of tourists having lengthy conversations about their spiritual practice in Kathmandu. Both in Boudha and elsewhere in Kathmandu, tourists tend to get to know other tourists and meet in cafés and discuss their practice, often comparing it with how they practice in their country of origin. Norman claims that this way of informally discussing their practice with each other is a common phenomenon among spiritual tourists.⁸²

Merely being in Kathmandu is a kind of participant observation, always striving to understand more of how everything is connected and how the religious life can be both for locals and for tourists. Immersing oneself in the field of study allows the researcher to observe what people *do*, instead of having to be completely dependent on texts in which other scholars already have made decisions about how to represent the religion.⁸³ The ways in which different aspects of the spiritual life in Kathmandu were promoted to *me* in the course of a day is in itself a measurement for how it is promoted to all other tourists, and how much of this is being exposed to the host community.

3.3 Sampling informants in Kathmandu

This being a qualitative research project, the aim was to get between six and eight informants. The plan was for the informants to be young, emerging adults, located right in the centre of the many changes that are occurring in Nepal. I contacted informants in various ways. Nepalis are normally very hospitable and eager to help with anything, so once I had been settled in Kathmandu for some time, finding informants was not very challenging. I conducted the first interview after having spent nine weeks in Nepal. The informants were acquired through mutual friends, except one, who contacted me after seeing a note I had hung on a notice board in a Buddhist college which has both international and local students. On this note, certain criteria for the informants were included. It was included that I needed ‘young Nepalis, who are comfortable with talking about religion’. The note also included that the interview would be conducted in English, ruling out those who would not have been able to do so. The criteria

⁸² Norman, *Spiritual tourism*, 31–32.

⁸³ Harvey, *Field Research*, 217.

of *young Nepali* turned out to be more complicated than first expected. What did *young* mean, and what was I ruling out by writing *Nepali*?

The youngest informant was in his early twenties (this one actually happens to be a Buddhist monk, as I had not ruled out *religious specialist* in the criteria either) and the oldest informant was in his early thirties. One informant had Tibetan origins, but viewed himself as *Nepali*, giving me no reason not to do the same. However I believe not having overly specific criteria has led to the collected data being of an assorted variety that well exemplifies said variety that does exist within the Kathmandu Valley. Had the criteria been more specific, it is entirely possible that many important points the informants made would have lacked. I therefore believe this lack of preciseness in advertising the project was important.

By the virtue of being a foreign visitor to Kathmandu, many Nepalis perhaps saw me as a *spiritual tourist*, with my regular attendance to conduct participant observation in yoga and meditation centres. Those Nepalis I did get in contact with must have had some contact with this aspect of tourism, just by being in contact with *me*. As a way of *purposive sampling*⁸⁴ this served its purpose, as all informants had opinions or ideas about spiritual tourism, and all became interested in reflecting upon what sort of impact it may have had on the religious practice of Nepalis, if not also themselves.

At one point, many responded to a post on the website ‘Couchsurfing’,⁸⁵ where I had chosen to promote my project with the promise of remuneration for those who participated. All those responses were difficult to sort out, and many were written in poor English, so I chose to remove this post on the same day. I ended up not contacting any of those who had responded to this post, and rather decided that acquiring informants through mutual friends was a better method.

3.3.1 Hindus and Buddhists in Nepal

The decision not to distinguish between Hindus and Buddhists in the search for informants might require some explanation. This is a distinction quickly used both in colloquial language and among scholars, but these separate categories are blurred in the complex religious scene in Nepal. As expressed by the informant Sujan, whose family are Newar Hindus:

⁸⁴ Bryman, *Social research methods*, 416.

⁸⁵ ‘Couchsurfing’ is an online worldwide social network, where people can contact people when travelling, and arrange for free accomodation with fellow travellers. You can ‘stay with locals instead of at hotels’. See: couchsurfing.com.

‘Here in Nepal – it is a very tolerant country, you know, with regards to religion, I would say. And also because we’ve always been, you know, Buddha has been linked so much with Hinduism, as in, he is an incarnation of Vishnu, so for me, I know they are different religions, but still, in principle, they are the same. They are the same for me.’

As mentioned in the background chapter: Most Hindus claim that Buddhism is a sub-sect of Hinduism and thus the same religion.⁸⁶ With this in mind, I chose to remove the *religion*-category from the criteria altogether, and ended up with a mixed group of informants with both Hindu and Buddhist family backgrounds. They would perform various religious practices and had different ideas about religious identity. As there is a lack of vocabulary more suited to the Nepali condition, the categories of *Hindu* and *Buddhist* will still be used throughout this thesis, but as mindfully as possible, and when possible with more precise specifications. The term *Hindu-Buddhist* could be an alternative, but does little to improve the way the religions are separated into the two, and it has so far not been much utilised by other scholars writing about Nepal.

3.4 Conducting interviews

Before preparing an interview guide, some prior knowledge about the milieu and the concept was necessary. For that reason I had many conversations over a cup of Nepali *chiya* and biscuits with those I will be terming *experts* throughout this thesis. They are not included in the main group of informants, but they played an important role in the process of preparing an interview guide with well-informed questions. I had several conversations with a Western expat who had lived in the Boudha area for several decades. Another was a renowned *khenpo*⁸⁷, who was the manager of a Buddhist institution in Kathmandu. As I participated in a summer course through the university of Aarhus held in Kathmandu in August, the professors leading this course had a great deal of knowledge about the area and could answer many questions early in the process. My Nepali teacher was also of great help and opened the gates to extending my network and getting in touch with informants. Conducting these kinds of *expert interviews* early on in the process can be (and were) extremely helpful in getting an overview of the field of study.⁸⁸

After finishing an interview guide, interviews were conducted with nine informants in a time span of three weeks. I quickly learned how important improvisation was, as much did not

⁸⁶ Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, 32.

⁸⁷ Khenpo is a title or a spiritual degree given after years of extensive studying within Tibetan Buddhism.

⁸⁸ Bremborg, *Interviewing*, 312.

go exactly according to plan. In two cases, two informants were present simultaneously, as they had planned without my knowledge that this would be more convenient. One informant I had only spoken with on the phone turned out to be a monk. Another wanted to meet outside of Kathmandu, in fear of being kept under surveillance by government authorities, as he had Tibetan origins. Having a semi-structured interview guide helped with adapting to these sudden change of plans, while still keeping to the set themes.

3.4.1 The semi-structured interview

In a qualitative interview, the researcher wants rich, detailed answers from the informant and ‘rambling’ or free associations are encouraged, as it gives a unique insight to what the informant views as important and what associations she/he makes.⁸⁹ The answers given by the informant should not reflect the researcher’s concerns, but rather the informant’s own thoughts and ideas.⁹⁰ The interview guide⁹¹ had specific questions, but open ended, to make sure I was not ruling out other interesting perspectives given by the informant during the interview. The structure of the interview guide largely set the structure of the analysis as well, as they were largely conversations which follow a certain natural development: The conversation started through getting to know who the informants were and how they reflected around their own practice, before we started talking about changes in the religious scene in Kathmandu. The element of spiritual tourism was not mentioned before halfway through the interview, to try and avoid letting that influence the first part of the conversation.

The fact that the informants had very different backgrounds led to all interviews inducing different follow-up questions and answers. The general themes of the interview were how/if they and/or their families would practice a religion on a daily basis, their contact with spiritual tourists, and how they viewed these.

I intended to record all interviews, but one informant preferred that I only made notes, and during one interview, the recorder malfunctioned in the monsoon climate. The notes I made from this interview were sufficient to still include in the data. I always chose to conduct interviews in places where I considered the informants would feel comfortable, such as the roof tops of cafés, in a room at their college, or in my Nepali teacher’s office. Still, before most of the interviews, the location was changed by the informant in the last minute. It is a common Nepali custom to invite all guests to have *daal bhat*, the Nepali national dish, with

⁸⁹ Bryman, *Social research methods*, 470.

⁹⁰ Bryman, *Social research methods*, 470.

⁹¹ See Appendix.

one's family when first meeting. I naturally went along with the sudden changes, assuming this was the situation that made the informants the most comfortable.

Conducting the interviews in English was mostly no problem at all, as the general level of English among emerging adults in Kathmandu is high. Whenever the informant had difficulties expressing themselves in English, I had them say and write it in Nepali, and had it translated later, with help from my Nepali teacher. However the one informant I chose to cut from the final data had some difficulties expressing himself in English, and made the interview setting very challenging for us both. In the transcriptions, I have corrected some of the grammar mistakes and removed some filler sounds.

3.5 The informants

In this section I will be presenting my informants briefly with only the most vital points. This will be important for the reader to see some context to the answers the informants make when I quote them later in the analysis. To protect their identity, they are all given new names:

- *Modan* is in his mid-twenties. He and his family are Newar Hindus. He has studied in India and Nepal. His family owns a guesthouse which is popular among tourists, so he has had extensive contact with them. We met through mutual friends. Modan's interview was recorded.
- *Sujan* is in his mid-twenties. He and his family are Newar Hindus. He has studied many years in London. He currently works as an entrepreneur. We met through mutual friends. Sujan and Modan have been close friends since childhood and they were interviewed together, and this was recorded.
- *Prem* is in his early thirties. He is a Newar Buddhist and he recently had a child with his wife. He works in a tourist agency. We met through mutual friends. Prem's interview was recorded.
- *Ram* is a Hindu of the Brahmin caste in his mid-twenties. He has studied in London and in Kathmandu. He works in a hotel in Kathmandu where the majority of the guests are Chinese. Ram preferred that I only made notes rather than record this interview. We met through mutual friends.
- *Gyasten* is in his late twenties. He is a Tibetan Buddhist and speaks English, Nepali and Tibetan fluently. He views himself as Nepali even though his family are of Tibetan origins. He has an education from the social sciences and is currently working with a tourist agency. Being of Tibetan origins, he did not want to meet in Kathmandu out of fear of being suspected of political engagement by Chinese authorities. We

therefore met in a town outside of Kathmandu. Gyasten's interview was recorded. We met through mutual friends.

- *Rin-che* is a Sherpa man in his early twenties and is currently a monk in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. He contacted me after seeing a note I had hung in the monastic college where he lives. Rin-che's interview was not recorded, mostly due to the café being very noisy, but I also got the impression that he preferred that the interview was kept as informal as possible.
- *Ankita* is in her early thirties. Her family are Hindus of the Brahmin caste, but she is currently in the process of converting to Vajrayana Buddhism. She is married to a Hindu Brahmin man, but neither he nor her family have had any problem with her conversion. She met her Rinpoche⁹² and decided to convert after having participated in an art class. We met through mutual friends. Ankita's interview was meant to be recorded, but the recorder malfunctioned after some minutes.
- *Kabita* is in her late twenties and born into a *Tibetan Newar* family, but has lived large parts of her adult life in the USA. She is now studying Buddhist philosophy at a Buddhist college in Kathmandu. Kabita's interview was recorded. We met through mutual friends.

3.6 Important issues to consider during fieldwork:

3.6.1 Language and translation

I conducted all interviews in English, which is neither mine nor the informants' first language. My Nepali teacher helped with translating those few sentences informants used in Nepali. Conducting the interviews and getting the answers directly in English left out the process of having to interpret and translate. Alan Williams defines translation as a 'creative scientific process'.⁹³ This is a point worth emphasising: it is a process not of neutrally transferring the exact meaning into another language, but of constant interpretation by a person with a cultural background and associations connected to this. Conducting the interviews in English thus provided the opportunity of directly quoting the informants, untouched by the potential changes a translation could have had. However, the informants, depending on their level of comfort with speaking English, may still have been translating from Nepali whilst being

⁹² *Rinpoche* is a term of respect used for religious teachers in Tibetan Buddhism, whom are considered to be incarnations of great teachers in the past. Lopez, *Modern Buddhism*, 261.

⁹³ Williams, *Translation*, 421.

interviewed. If they were *thinking* in their native language, then they will also be translating words to English, which might not have the same meanings and associations connected to them as their Nepali word of choice.

3.6.2 Remuneration

After consulting with the expert informants and with friends from Nepal, I chose to promise remuneration to those willing to meet for an interview. Upon advice from my experts on this, I decided upon 500 NRs.⁹⁴ Out of the originally nine informants, only three accepted this reward, one of which was the one I later chose to exclude from the analysis. The rest politely declined, telling me it was completely unnecessary for their participation, which is an interesting point in itself. At least six informants were certainly *not* participating to receive the remuneration.

3.6.3 Gender

After having conducted seven interviews with only male informants, I finally acquired two female informants. When I had posted my note on Couchsurfing, there were exclusively males responding. This made me consider what kind of motivation the ones who did respond had for wanting to be interviewed. As a European woman, I have been asked to help Nepali men in the past with getting their Visas to various European countries, and it is hard to ignore the possibility that some of those who were contacting me may have had something similar in mind. I strongly doubt this is the case with any of the males I have interviewed, as we met through mutual friends, and they never asked anything of me. During the time I was conducting the interviews, several women declined my attempts to get in touch with them. The only two female informants I finally met, I got in contact with during the last week of fieldwork in Nepal. I have spent much time trying to figure out why this gender gap appeared. The pressure on women to achieve within both education and in the home in Nepal is probably very high, but there is no reason to assume this same pressure is not present for males, who are still the main financial caretakers in Nepali homes. Had I contacted more informants, this gender gap may have disappeared entirely, or it may have remained stable.

3.6.4 The role of the researcher

This brings me to the topic of the researcher's role in conducting a fieldwork. How the informants viewed *me* would inevitably have had an impact on the data generated from their answers. They will have met me as a European woman living in Boudha, dressed

⁹⁴ 500 Nepali Rupees = 37 Norwegian Kroner (May 2015).

appropriately in a traditional Nepali *kurta surwal*. This is an area with a high density of tourists participating in meditation classes, studying ‘the dharma’ (which people always would ask if I were doing) or doing long-term retreats. Through friends and by participating in various activities, I encountered many ‘spiritual tourists’ here. It is therefore also probable that the informants viewed *me* as a spiritual tourist – the very topic I was asking them about. It is difficult to analyse whether or not this may have impacted their responses during the interviews. During all interviews we would at some point discuss the terms we used and agree on what the used terms meant in the given context, such as *religion* or *philosophy* and *religiosity* and *spirituality*. A complete coherence will always be impossible to achieve, but I let the informants choose which term we would be using during the interviews to try and impose on them as little as possible of my own predisposed religious categories.

Another challenge to the researcher conducting a fieldwork is how she integrates herself in the environment she is studying. Being based in an environment where spiritual tourists are highly present, could give the researcher the impression that the general number of these are much higher than what is the reality. In this research, Nepalis living outside the tourist zones might not be as exposed to spiritual tourism as it would seem when living in the centre of Kathmandu. This could also have an impact on the research itself, as the researcher could end up placing too much emphasis on a marginal phenomenon, because from her point of view, the phenomenon is everywhere, and the approach would thus be based on wrongful assumptions. Being aware of the possibility of this happening, and visiting areas where the studied phenomenon is more spread out, or not at all present, might be a good way of avoiding this, and make sure the research project is based on knowledge and not prejudice.

3.6.5 Ethical considerations

After all interviews, the informants were given a ‘thank you’-note which had my contact information, in case they wanted to contact me with any enquiries. This note also informed them of the opportunity to withdraw their participation in the study if they were to change their minds. I had also informed all informants of this before the interview.

There are many aspects to consider, and particularly those of an ethical nature, when it comes to participant observation. When asked, I was never dishonest about reasons for my participation in courses or seminars, and I never received any negativity regarding this. When observing and/or participating in public spaces or in cafés, an introduction of me as a researcher was not possible by any practical means. Observing people when I have not asked their permission is of course problematic. Cafés are examples of a ‘borderline official

location'.⁹⁵ The researcher has to be respectful of what she is studying, and treat the material carefully, not using video or tape recordings without anyone's permission. I made no recordings from these *covert* observations, so there will be no descriptions of or quotes from anybody whom I did not interview directly.

In addition to this, a researcher can never fully know if the surrounding situation is impacted by her presence. Scholars have worked for decades trying to develop techniques for performing *epoché*⁹⁶ when conducting a fieldwork, but there is still no ultimate technique or clear solution to the problem. Being aware of the fact that the researcher *does have* these predisposed thoughts or ideas is crucial to a valid fieldwork.⁹⁷

The project was prior to this fieldwork submitted and approved by the Norwegian institution NSD (Norsk Samfunnsvitenskapelig Datatjeneste), to secure the safety of the informants, which should be one of the researcher's top priorities when conducting a field work. During the very early stages of the fieldwork I made some changes regarding the thesis topic, and these were approved by the NSD after a second evaluation.

After the earthquake happened on the 25th of April, I considered withdrawing the participation of those informants whom I could not get in touch with. However I have made the decision that these will also be included, and I hope to reach them when the situation is stabilised.

⁹⁵ Fangen, *Deltakende observasjon*, 156.

⁹⁶ Epoché is the term used to describe the phenomena when the researchers is able to set aside prior assumptions and/or prejudice in a fieldwork, not having these reflect in the data material collected. Harvey, *Field Research*, 232.

⁹⁷ Harvey, *Field Research*, 232.

Chapter 4: 'There are so many things we just don't know!'

Emerging adults and their religious practice in Kathmandu

Perhaps even more so than with other age groups, the emerging adults have to balance their parents' culture and traditions, and make choices about how to involve with a new, global, cosmopolitan culture gaining foothold in the city of Kathmandu. Asking the informants about religious identity with no exceptions turned into longer conversations about changes in society and ideas about westernisation and/or modernisation of Nepal in general. Talking with eight individuals from different backgrounds in different circumstances has resulted in a data material vast with variety, and particularly with regards to answers about religious practice. With all eight informants being roughly around the age of what many now are calling 'emerging adults' have however brought about some interesting similarities among them that will be discussed in the first paragraph of this chapter. By inducing the informants to talk about religion and identifying how they practice what they name as their religion, I intended on registering whether or not there were any similarities between them and with what is trending in practice among spiritual tourists in Kathmandu. In addition to learning how the informants would practice religion, it was also useful getting to know how much contact they had had with spiritual tourism and also how they defined 'religion', to reach a better understanding of how un/important this was in their daily lives.

4.1 Emerging adults in a cosmopolitan Kathmandu

Throughout most of human history, cultural identity development has likely been a relatively less complex process than what is the case in most places today.⁹⁸ Where before, children were born into a given culture, and had little choice but to adapt within it and find one's own place within the given norms and customs, young people today are rarely growing up knowing only one culture.⁹⁹ To an extent that transcends all other periods in a human's life, emerging adults experience multiple life transitions, both those they choose and those that come unanticipated.¹⁰⁰ Some choose to go to university or not, some establish families, some delay this, some decide not to, many move away, or come back.

Mark Liechty studied *youth identities* and *modernity* in the early 1990s and conducted a fieldwork in Kathmandu. He presents his main question of 'what it means for young people to

⁹⁸ Jensen and Arnett, "Going Global", 476.

⁹⁹ Jensen and Arnett, "Going Global", 473.

¹⁰⁰ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 33.

grow up in a world radically different from that of their parents’¹⁰¹, a question that came up as an essential one during my conversations about religious practice with the informants. He claims that:

‘[S]ince the eighteenth century, but especially since 1951, Kathmandu’s society has gone from one in which identities were derived from the cultural contrasts found in a relatively stable, contained universe of known roles and ways of being, to a society whose frames of reference and contrastive awareness are of literally global dimensions.’¹⁰²

When presenting possible reaction patterns to changing cultural situations due to globalisation, Jensen and Arnett adapted a model first presented by John W. Berry in 1997, intended on describing how immigrants may react to new environments with new cultures. Berry’s original question in presenting his model was: ‘What happens to individuals, who have developed in one cultural context, when they attempt to live in a new cultural context?’.

¹⁰³Jensen and Arnett rephrased this into: ‘What happens in the identity development of adolescents and emerging adults when they are presented with multiple cultural contexts, including their local culture and other cultures they come into contact with via globalization?’ They present examples in the given categories of reactions, which are *assimilation*, *separation*, *integration*, or *marginalisation*. An example Jensen and Arnett use, is based on Liechty’s fieldwork among emerging adults in Kathmandu, and placed in the *marginalisation* category. This category entails a ‘*cultural distance*, meaning dissimilarity between the culture of origin and the new culture. With regard to globalization, marginalization may take place among people whose local culture is being rapidly altered by globalization.’ (Emphasis in original).¹⁰⁴ Arnett refers to a theory of stages of religious development linked with cognitive development. Late adolescence and emerging adulthood are found in a stage of *individuating-reflective faith*, which is when the emerging adults start to rely less on their parents’ beliefs, and rather develop more personal faiths through incorporating individual experiences and questioning their potentially already existing belief.¹⁰⁵

Jensen and Arnett also claim that based on research with immigrants in the USA, ‘adolescents change their behaviors, beliefs, values, and identification more than adults do.’¹⁰⁶

¹⁰¹ Liechty, “Media, Markets and Modernization”, 166.

¹⁰² Liechty, “Media, Markets and Modernization”, 167–168.

¹⁰³ I have only utilised this question as it was represented in Jensen’s and Arnett’s “Going Global”, and have not consulted with Berry’s original text.

¹⁰⁴ Jensen and Arnett, “Going Global”, 480–481.

¹⁰⁵ Arnett, *Adolescence and Emerging Adulthood*, 117.

¹⁰⁶ Jensen and Arnett, “Going Global”, 476.

The emerging adults of Kathmandu are in the same situation, having to make important decisions about their future lives. They are also possibly most exposed to media, heavily promoting the ideologies associated with the Western world. Adolescents and emerging adults often show more interest in popular media culture, compared to age groups on either side of theirs – children or adults, and will thus experience the force of globalisation through media more intensely.¹⁰⁷

The informants have grown up in an increasingly cosmopolitan city that is undergoing massive and rapid changes, both culturally and economically, with regard to global trade, Western tourism, and the availability of mass media.¹⁰⁸ The many spiritual tourists coming to Kathmandu from Western countries are parts of this globalisation processes, bringing foreign influence and cultural elements from their homes with them.

The media ideals spreading from Western countries among young people in Kathmandu can alter their expectations of what it means to be modern today, often times leaving them without being able to reach these ideals due to a lack of resources.¹⁰⁹ As a result they may end up feeling alienated both from the local culture their parents have taught them, *and* the global culture presented to them through the new available media,¹¹⁰ leaving them in a state of limbo, neither fully part of their local culture, nor the global alternative. As will be demonstrated below, all eight informants have most definitely distanced themselves, to differing degrees, from what they presented as the religion practiced by their parents. Their explanations as to why this was the case varies, but none of the informants wanted much to do with what they termed the ‘superstition’ that their parents still believed in and/or practiced. This confirms the thesis of Jensen and Arnett, namely that a certain cultural distance typically exists between emerging adults and their culture of origin. This distance might make the emerging adults of Kathmandu more inclined to seek alternative religious or spiritual practices, apart from what their parents previously have or have not taught them.

Some informants confirmed that they had used TV programs for learning about religion, something that would not have been available at all to their parents’ or generations before them. All informants (except Rin-che) replied that they assumed that their parents were *more religious* than themselves, and in a very different way. A point Moran brings up regarding the parent generation of young Buddhists in Boudha, is the fact that it makes sense that older

¹⁰⁷ Jensen and Arnett, “Going Global”, 475.

¹⁰⁸ Jensen and Arnett, “Going Global”, 481.

¹⁰⁹ Jensen and Arnett, “Going Global”, 482.

¹¹⁰ Jensen and Arnett, “Going Global”, 482.

people to be more occupied with religious themes, partly because they simply have more time to do so.¹¹¹ Being closer to the end of their lives might also cause them to reflect more about the great themes such as death and afterlife¹¹² and further cause them to seek out the religious practices they perhaps chose not to give priority in an earlier life stage. As Sujan expressed how he would discuss religion with his parents:

It is a really sensitive topic to talk about, because of the way that they have been brought up, the way that they were taught religion, they have been exposed to only one religion, so for them, you know, giving them explanations about other religions would be a bit ridiculous, because they simply have not experienced it, but me on the other hand, or Modan, we have had friends who are from different religions, you know, we know their practices, we've watched movies, we've watched documentaries, so we are more open to that concept than what they are. So when it comes to discussing religion with my parents, of course I try to find out more about the religion. But it is usually about the practicality of religion or the traditions that have come through religion. That is always the discussing point.

4.1.1 Holy water vs. business studies

The informants talked about differences between their and their parents' religious practice, but also about the differences in their and their parents' lives in general. All the informants were well educated at universities and all except Rin-che, and Ankita (who was in fact converting from the religion of her parents), claimed that their parents would criticise them for '*not being religious enough*'. Gyasten laughed when I asked him about his parents' view of his religious practice:

Haha, yeah, yeah, they tell me all the time that 'oh you are not that religious!' Haha! They criticize me indirectly, for not visiting some temples or not visiting some religious occasion. 'Oh you do not look like a religious!' or something like that.

Sujan and Modan both agreed that they would have no idea how to perform the religious rituals their parents normally would perform in festivals. If they were to have performed them, they would have needed their mothers' assistance in every step of the ritual. When asked about his own religious practice, Sujan said:

I would need my mum or my grand mum always next to me, you know, because I.. Just because I haven't had an interest in it, you know. I have never really learnt how to do things that way. Also

¹¹¹ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 155–156.

¹¹² Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 155–156.

because I have not studied Sanskrit, so reading the texts is very, very difficult for me. So following the traditions would be a challenge.

There is a great deal of pressure on the emerging adults of Kathmandu today, and most are urged to educate themselves within areas such as computers, business and IT, hoping it will provide them good employments. Sujan, who has studied business, expressed some frustration with the fact that the knowledge passed on from generations and to his parents has stopped interesting young people today, himself included:

I feel that the sad thing for me that is going on right now is.. we actually don't have the option, you know, to study about religion. If I would have wanted to, you know. Especially with Hindu religion, we have been affected by the Western civilisation so much, you know, studying English is so important, studying management, computers, it is so important that we have neglected the base. For example Sanskrit. We have seven (...) major universities here in Nepal, only ONE teaches Sanskrit, and that it the most frowned upon university, you know! Like 'Ah, why would you want to study Sanskrit?!' No! Maybe I want to study, because of a genuine interest in it! But there is no future in it, so people don't study it (...). This option hasn't been provided yet.

Sujan expressed frustration with the way rituals were conducted, as he phrased it: 'blindly', but wanted to emphasise how he was also proud of his culture and tradition and that it would be sad to see it fade away and added that: 'We just don't know all the things our parents do!'. Learning about religion is by many simply not a priority, and cannot be, as they have so many other things they have to do to be successful, or choose to focus on. All the informants, again except Rin-che and Ankita, said that they had learnt mostly everything they knew of their religion from their parents. If they stop showing interest because they have new priorities, and knowledge about religion is not provided from any other institution, it will entail a drastic and rapid change in the level of 'traditional' knowledge among emerging adults in Kathmandu today. However if they *were* to show interest in religious topics, what would then be available to them? The parents of my informants, having expressed a certain disappointment with their son's or daughter's religious practice, or other older family members, would in many cases probably both be able and willing to teach them the rituals usually performed during festivals and birthdays. The same six informants informed me that they were critical of the way their parents would perform rituals or consult with priests or astrologers, but did not discuss it much, because they did not want to hurt their feelings. Modan expressed his frustration with the elaborate rituals his parents would ask him to participate in by saying:

The tika¹¹³ is good, you offer flowers, that's good, like foods and all that is good. But I just hate the part where they offer you the water. It is supposed to be holy water. And you are supposed to take it in your right hand, and with the left hand you sprinkle it, you put it on the eye, drink a little bit, and whatever is left, you rub it in your hair. And that I don't like. Because that water is NOT clean! And I tell my mum, like, sometimes it is sweet, and sometimes it is salty. I just doubt that water. My mum is always like, if a drop falls on the floor, she is like 'Don't step [on it], don't step!' She drinks the water and she does the water sprinkling and I find that.. I don't know, I don't see any logic in that. (...) Just not to disrespect my mum, I take it, I sprinkle my eyes and I pretend I am drinking it, and then I rub it in my hair. Then I go up and wash my hair. I don't say any doubts to my mum, because I don't want her to get discouraged.

This theme was common among all these six informants. They said they were missing 'logical explanations' in religious rituals, but they were careful when expressing this to their elders, wanting to protect their feelings. Kabita also brought up the difference in her and her older family members' religious practice:

My parents always feel I understand the meaning behind rituals and prayers more than them, yeah, because I have read the teachings and visited the guru, it has been more accessible. But from their point of view, we are not practicing the right way, we are not emulating the right thing, to them it is no good, because I also smoke cigarettes, right.

To Kabita, the way her parents want her to practice rituals the *right* way did not seem as important to her as knowing the *meaning* behind them. Smoking cigarettes does not combine well with correct religious practice according to her parents, but to her, having the correct understanding of the religion or spirituality she practices is the most important aspect, to which *smoking* is not necessarily an obstacle.

In the beginning of his interview, Ram did not seem to find the topic of religion very interesting to talk about, but by the end of the interview, he was suggesting that there should have been more information available to him, so he could have known more about religions. He used as an example that he had no idea what the holy thread his parents had given him, that he always wore around his neck *meant*, but he would still wear it every day. He claimed there was an *information gap* between him and his parents, and that this was due to his level of education, and their lack of the same. Similar to Modan, Ram said he would refuse to drink

¹¹³ A tika is most commonly a powdery substance one places on one's forehead. During festival season, it is common for family members to 'give tika' to other family members.

the holy water or food offered to him during pujas by his mother, and that this was due to hygienic precautions he felt his mother was not aware of.

4.2 Religious and spiritual practice among the eight informants

To be able to systematically present how the informants would *practice* religion, they will here be presented individually (except Sujana and Modan, who elaborated on each other's answers during the interview conducted with both present). Here, some information will be included which will be further elaborated in coming chapters.

4.2.1 Rin-che's practice

Of the eight interviews, the one which stood out as the most different from the others was the interview with Rin-che, the young monk. The nature of his religious practice he viewed as being more or less obvious, being a monk of a Buddhist monastery of a Vajrayana tradition. During the interview he preferred discussing Buddhist philosophy and Western impact on certain aspects of the Kathmandu life; hence there is little data on how he personally practiced Buddhism. He did make some interesting remarks about Western Buddhists that I will return to in chapter six. He said that he would read a lot of Buddhist philosophy, and he was also eager to both talk and learn about other religions. The fact that he spent much time during the interview asking *me* questions about Buddhist philosophy shows that he was eager to learn what I knew of Buddhism from studies in Norway, and how Buddhism is taught outside of the monasteries. He had been in contact with spiritual tourists studying in an institute affiliated with his monastery and others living in Boudha.

4.2.2 Ankita's practice

Ankita, in her early thirties, was in the process of fully converting to Vajrayana Buddhism. She said that she would practice Buddhism by studying it, performing mantras, doing prostrations, retreats, meditation, vegetarianism, as she expressed it: 'everything really!'. If she had time, she would meditate for several hours every day, which she claimed made her feel happier and more 'at peace'. Much time was also spent communicating with her Rinpoche, with whom she had a very close relationship. She emphasised that he spent most of his time in the USA, where he had several 'dharma centres' and that they mostly spoke via telephone, usually every day. She had done several retreats in two popular Buddhist centres in Kathmandu which are connected to monasteries and are frequently visited by Westerners. Since she did not have her family to discuss Buddhist matters with, she had started reading a lot about Buddhism from books and from internet sites.

After having been to several retreats, Ankita had met many spiritual tourists practicing Buddhism in Kathmandu, and had remained friends with some of them. She claimed it was good to have somebody to discuss Buddhist philosophy and practice with. She also participated in some art courses, learning to paint mandalas, and there she met several Buddhists, both Nepalis and foreigners, who inspired her to learn more about Buddhism, and eventually to convert. When asked what had first evoked her interest in Buddhism, she replied that she had been seeing *Buddhist quotes* everywhere, and said she had thought ‘Oh, they’re so nice!’. She also brought up how her parents’ idea of religion was completely different to hers. Her mother had learnt performing Hindu rituals by *doing* exactly what her parents had done before her. Ankita referred to her mother’s practice as *superstition*, and eagerly expressed that it was essential now that the younger generations had to change this. She was hoping she would get the opportunity to travel to the USA and visit her Rinpoche’s dharma centres and learn more about Buddhism from there.

4.2.3 Kabita’s practice

Kabita described her family’s religious origin as ‘Tibetan Newar Buddhists’, and described Buddhism as a philosophy she would apply in everyday life. She openly reflected about her religious identity, and was the only one to describe herself as ‘spiritual, but not religious’. She was also the only one to say that Buddhism and Hinduism to her were two completely different things, and could not be compared. With her family, she would perform morning rituals for their house deity, which had some secret aspects she could not talk about with anyone outside the family. Buddhism to her was so integrated in everyday life that describing it as a separate aspect made little sense:

For me now, Buddhism is basically questioning everything. The Buddhism I knew before was ritual stuff, the cultural stuff, you know. Now I am understanding the actual practice stuff, what it means to follow your guru. Buddhism to me is *Bodhicitta*¹¹⁴, yeah. Be good to others, and not only to other people, but also to ants.

4.2.4 Modan’s and Sujana’s practice

Both Modan and Sujana would participate in *pujas* performed for special occasions in their families, but would make some ‘short cuts’ to avoid spending much time doing it. Sujana included his whole family when talking about these short cuts:

¹¹⁴ Bodhicitta is something everyone has, according to the Mahayana teachings about the Bodhisattva ideal. To commence on a path towards becoming a Bodhisattva, one must first awaken one’s *bodhicitta*. Jacobsen, *Buddhisme*, 113.

As Modan was saying, in his family it still takes two-three hours to do puja, but in my family, both my dad and mum are working, so we don't have time for all that, so we just wrap it up in half an hour to one hour. If we actually go through all the procedures it would really take us two hours to complete the puja! But now, since everyone is working, they have to work, right, we have opted for the short cuts, you know.

Both would have discussions with their parents about the performance of rituals, but not to the degree where they risked hurting their parents' feelings. Disliking parts of rituals has made Modan try to avoid them sometimes, or try to make his family adjust to some minor changes:

Anyways, I am always negotiating, trying to make some logical explanations. Like eggs! For people who are allergic, there should be some substitute! Everyone is like 'No, you should eat it, it is the most sacred thing, you cannot skip it' and all those things. I find all that to be crap. Like for people who don't drink wine. There is a substitute for them, I don't know.. milk? So I always start these kinds of logical debates with my elders whenever they are there.

One thing both of them *would* do was to slow down when driving past temples on their motorbikes. This is something one can observe all over Nepal, that people, both young and old, will slow down their vehicles and make a hand motion from their forehead to their lips three times, to show their respect to the deity or holy site that they are passing. Modan described it like this: 'I don't have time to go inside the temple, but just from the outside, on my bike, I'll just do this [demonstrates hand motion], just like that!' Sujan did not practice any sort of meditation or yoga, except for a short period some years back when he had attended a yoga course at a centre in Kathmandu. Modan said he would sometimes go into his mother's prayer room when it was empty and stay there for half an hour, saying that this was 'like meditation'.

Surprisingly, Sujan told a story at the very end of the interview of how he had recently gone to get an alternative health treatment. Instead of getting antibiotics, like his grandfather and his friends and told him to, he went and got a temporary tattoo over the infected area. This is especially interesting because what he had said previous to this story about how he preferred there to be some logic or reason behind the practice. What then, were his reasons for defying the traits of medicine, and choosing an alternative procedure? Curiosity might be one reason. His parents telling him stories (he described one of these stories after the interview) about alternative treatments that had helped in the past might be another.

4.2.5 Gyasten's practice

Gyasten said that the most important practice to him was simply being a good person and not injuring other beings. He would also go to his family's prayer room before special occasions:

But that [going to the prayer room] is not a regular practice, because we are the young generation, right, but if I have to travel or do something important, or have an exam, everybody wants good luck on their exams, right! So I make sure I go in front of the prayer room to just.. I will not always ask for a good thing, but avoid something, like some disturbance on my way to the exam, for example.

Gyasten, calling his parents 'hard core religious', also confirmed the contrast between how he practices and how his parents and other older family members practice religion. He said that because they got very little education when they were young, religion had been their main focus in life, while for him, knowledge attained through education was more important. He had never tried meditation or yoga, but claimed he wanted to try it when he had more time, because of the health benefits it could bring.

4.2.6 Prem's practice

Similar to Gyasten, Prem emphasised that the most important practice was being a good person and living a life without harming others.

What I believe is that God is everywhere, in every heart. But still people believe in going to temples, and in worshipping gods and goddesses, that is also out of culture. I also do believe, but I don't do things the way they [his parents] do.

He also said that to him, Buddhism was *not* a religion, but a philosophy. He said he would sometimes read Buddhist texts to learn more about the teachings of the Buddha. When asked if he had ever practiced meditation or yoga, Prem replied:

Well.. Without teachers. As exercises. In the mornings, there are some [TV-] channels which teach meditation and the yogas. So I used to do that! In the mornings. But I don't follow.. I don't go to any institute or yoga centre or anything like that.

Prem also knew many friends and family members who had participated in retreats in and around Kathmandu, and he wanted to do this himself, when he had more time. When discussing how to teach Buddhism to his new born child when he got older, he emphasised how he wanted to teach him only the most important things from Buddhism, now calling it 'the moral things' and 'how to respect their parents, how to love and what is good and bad'.

After he mentioned the concept of *enlightenment*, I asked him whether that was a goal for him to strive for:

No. Actually that is very difficult. Actually I just want to be a good person. For enlightenment, one needs to practice a LOT. One has to have a good teacher and it is very difficult for us in today's world. I believe everyone is busy. So it is very difficult for people. Haha, I have never thought about getting enlightened. But just to be a good person.

Prem was the only informant to even mention enlightenment at all, a concept often emphasised in Western teachings of Buddhism, as it has been common in the West to assume that members of a religion must have the same ultimate goal.¹¹⁵ Enlightenment *is* however a theme often discussed among Western Buddhists, who often do have more similarities with Buddhist religious specialists than with Buddhist laypeople, a topic which I will return to.¹¹⁶

4.2.7 Ram's practice

Ram said he would sometimes perform puja with his mother during special occasions and during festivals. His mother would also contact priests on his behalf to receive advice before major life decisions, which was something he did not appreciate much. He had learnt about religion from his parents and from 'society in general'. He said that he had not read any 'Hindu texts', but 'just the stories' his parents and grandparents would tell him when he was younger. Ram would, similar to Modan and Sujana, not take the holy water or food offered in pujas, because he found it to be unhygienic. Neither would he do the ritual bath meant to be taken before performing a puja, explaining this by saying that nobody has that much time to spend on religious practice anymore. He expressed some frustration with the fact that he knew very little of his family religion, but said he had nowhere to turn to learn what he was interested in:

If I want to follow the religion, I can, if it is my wish. Nepal should provide better information about its religions, so one could ask questions. For example, I don't know the history of the Kumari¹¹⁷, I just know she is there. There are so many things we [young people in Nepal] just don't know!

¹¹⁵ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 97.

¹¹⁶ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 136.

¹¹⁷ The Kumari is the living goddess of Kathmandu, worshipped by thousands. She is chosen among a given caste for her appearance and other necessary traits. When she is old enough to start menstruating, or she bleeds for some other reason, another girl is chosen to be the Kumari.

A common cultural practice one can often witness in Nepal is how one touches the feet of one's elders or other respected persons with one's forehead. This Ram had stopped doing, saying 'I don't touch my parent's feet anymore, but I still love them!' Interestingly, Ram made a comment saying 'I feel Buddhism is the best religion in the world', when comparing it with Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. He said that those were very 'conservative', although he felt that Hinduism was changing: 'It now has a more 'white mind', now you can do whatever you want!'. How to interpret what he meant by saying 'white mind' I am very unsure of, and I did not get a clear response when asking him to elaborate on this, other than when comparing it with what he called 'pure Hinduism', it had now changed to being more adapted to today's world, again repeating 'today's *white mind*', possibly talking about a Western secular influence.

4.2.8 Chart of religious activity

Using the informants' own words, the following chart will be summing up the information given by them concerning their religious practice, and whether or not they have been in contact with spiritual tourism in Kathmandu, as this will become more relevant in chapter five and six:

INFORMANT	RELIGIOUS PRACTICE	RELIGIOUS ORIGIN
Modan	No regular practice. Joins family in religious rituals during festivals and birthdays. Slows down to show his respect when passing a temple next to the road. Meditates in the family prayer room sometimes. Has had some contact with Western spiritual tourism.	Newar Hindu
Sujan	No regular practice, but joins family in religious rituals during festivals and birthdays. Both parents work, so the rituals are shortened down. Slows down to show his respect when passing a temple next to the road. Used to practice meditation, but did not find it very interesting. Has had some contact with Western spiritual tourists.	Newar Hindu
Ram	No regular practice. Performs puja sometimes with his family. Wears the 'holy thread' around his neck, but claims that is only due to 'tradition'. Celebrates festivals, but mostly without the religious rituals. Has had little contact with Western spiritual tourists.	Hindu Brahmin

Prem	Visits temples occasionally. Said that his practice is remembering God in his heart and wishing good things for all beings. Used to watch religious programs about meditation practice on TV in the mornings, but quit this when he became a father. Has had little contact with western spiritual tourists.	Newar Buddhist
Gyasten	No regular practice, but does visit the family's prayer room before special occasions such as an exam. Wants to practice meditation, but does not have the time for it. Has had little contact with western spiritual tourists.	Tibetan Buddhist
Rin-che	Regular practice in the monastic college where he lives. Daily rituals as decided by the leaders of the monastery. Has had some contact with Western spiritual tourists.	Tibetan Buddhist
Ankita	Regular daily practice. Studies Buddhism by reading and communicating with her Rinpoche. Performs mantras, prostrations, goes on retreats, practices meditation and yoga several hours daily if possible. Has had extensive contact with Western spiritual tourists in Nepal.	Hindu Brahmin, converting to Vajrayana Buddhism
Kabita	Daily practice with family to worship their house deity. Reads Buddhist texts and visits her guru. Been to several retreats. Her main practice is doing good things for all beings. Has had extensive contact with Western spiritual tourists, in Nepal and in the USA.	Tibetan Newar Buddhist

Table 1 Religious practice

4.3 'Soul transitions' in emerging adulthood

Christian Smith conducted a study in which he has provided us with a series of religious 'types' among emerging adults. As his study was conducted over a wide time span in the USA, the categories used to locate religious ideas among the recipients would to some degree be inaccurate if adopted in a Nepali context. He writes that '[e]merging adults' religious and spiritual assumptions, experiences, outlooks, beliefs, and practices do not exist in compartmentalized isolation from their larger cultural worldviews and lived experiences but are often related to and powerfully shaped by them'.¹¹⁸ To achieve any understanding of their 'religious and spiritual worlds', one must also understand the broader context of the cultural worlds in which they live.¹¹⁹ However, a closer look at the religious and spiritual *types* he presents, there are some interesting aspects possible to adopt in this study. Smith's research included qualitative interviews with 230 emerging adults in the USA. Using the data to categorise the different variations of religious adherents, these informants fall into six

¹¹⁸ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 33.

¹¹⁹ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 33.

different categories, ranging from ‘committed traditionalists’ to ‘irreligious emerging adults’.¹²⁰ Some of these categories suggest adherence to specific religious forms, what Smith calls ‘mainstream faith traditions’, comparing them with more ‘customized personal spiritualities or unusual faiths’. They thus become a lot less adaptable to Nepali conditions. According to these categories, Ankita and Rin-che would both count as ‘committed traditionalists’. This category is however quite specific to an American context in the way that the adherents of this category are assumingly keeping their religious practice private, and that they are following ‘mainstream faith traditions’. Two other categories can be applied to the rest of the informants:

- Category 2: The Selective Adherents. These emerging adults tend to perform certain aspects of their religious traditions, while neglecting or ignoring others. These will often have had religious upbringings, but tend to be critical of what parts of their tradition they are willing to adopt. They will find many of the beliefs and practices to be ‘outdated’, and pick and choose elements to customize their belief system.¹²¹ This group is considered a minority group among emerging adults in the USA, and comprise around thirty percent.¹²² Prem, Ram, Modan, Sujana, and Gyastan all share traits that partially or completely fit within this category.
- Category 3: The Spiritually Open. These emerging adults ‘may be skeptical or critical toward certain forms of religion or spirituality but are definitely open to others. They may be currently exploring specific religious ideas (...).¹²³ They will be receptive to, and have varying interest in religious or spiritual matters, and will have a belief that there is ‘something out there’. According to Smith, around fifteen percent of emerging adults in the USA are ‘spiritually open’. This description fits Kabita quite well.

It is specified in both category 2 and 3 that its adherents will be willing to ‘pick and choose’ or ‘be receptive to’ elements they can adopt into their own practice or belief. It is thus possible to assume from this that at least six of my informants will possibly adapt (or are adapting) their religious practice as they grow to adulthood. These adaptations could include learning more about their families’ traditions and seeking back to those, or they could be

¹²⁰ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167–168.

¹²¹ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167.

¹²² Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167.

¹²³ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167.

adopting new elements that have not been available or interesting before. Spiritual practices offered in Kathmandu could be adopted in a process such as this.

4.4 The next generation

With the intention of wanting to try and outline how the informants will treat their families' religious origin in the future and how or if they would pass their traditions to the next generation, I chose to include a question about how they would teach religious topics to their children if they were to have any. This was included partly because it was interesting to hear their estimates of how fast their family's religious tradition would change, and a good topic to discuss to bring about a meaningful reflection about their religious identity. This question was introduced after they had talked about differences in their and their parents' religious practice, and some replies are coloured by that prior discussion. Rin-che being a monk was not asked about his future family life. Kabita was the only one who wanted her children, if she were to have any, to get a religious education in a monastic school:

So I would send my kids to a monastic school, later I would let it be up to them, give them the option, you know. Not only the practice, but try to make them understand the meaning. I will not force them to do prostrations. And I will explain and if they like it, then why not?

Modan and Sujana introduced the theme at the very beginning of the interview, when discussing how much Kathmandu was changing and modernising. Modan then said that he thought many of the Hindu rituals, and animal sacrifice in particular, would fade away from people's daily lives, slowly in the villages, but faster in the cities. By Modan's estimates, by the 'next generation', the animal sacrifice would no longer be conducted in Kathmandu. Sujana agreed and added that he would not give his son a *kukhuri*, the Nepali sacrificial knives which boys normally get when they are very young.

Ram replied that he had not thought about how to teach or not teach religion to his children if he were to have any, saying that they would learn what they needed from the society around them. He mentioned that religious festivals would probably still be present, but that the festivals were changing, where their importance were no longer a matter of religion, but of spending time with family and friends. Prem, when asked whether or not he would teach his family's religious traditions to his child, replied by first taking a long pause, before he said:

Hm.. Not blindly. But the good parts I will definitely like to continue. The bad parts, or the superstition, those things I don't want. But mostly religions teach good things. So I'd like to take good things from the religion.

Gyasten's child was still very young, but he said he would eventually want to take her to Buddhist monasteries for visits and teach her about Buddhism that way. He wanted her to grow up in a Buddhist environment to 'continue with the religious system, we want to hand it over to our next generation as well, right. (...) To keep our culture as much as our religion.'

Gyasten replied that he wanted to maintain his family's Tibetan culture, and that teaching his child about Buddhism would be an important part of this. The same aspect was present during the interview with Modan and Sujana, as they kept repeating that it was sad to see everything fade away, and seeing people turning their backs to family traditions. They and Ram were asking for more *information* about their traditions, but wanting to keep what they viewed as superstition as well as some rituals, such as the animal sacrifice, out of their religious practice.

It is quite obvious from the informants' replies that much change will be occurring in this generation. It is an era of massive changes in Kathmandu, and these emerging adults are perhaps the ones who are feeling the impacts of these changes the most, when having to make decisions. If what they are saying are in fact what will happen, and their opinions regarding this is even slightly similar among their age peers, Kathmandu's religious scene among Nepalis might be looking a lot different in the generations to come.

4.5 Chapter conclusion and summary

Ankita and Kabita were the only ones to say they had had extensive contact with spiritual tourism, and they were also the ones who said they practiced both yoga and meditation in centres in Kathmandu extensively. Ankita was the one informant who showed a clear resemblance with spiritual tourists, with regards to *practice*. That does not necessarily mean that there is a causal link between her encounters with spiritual tourism and her practice. Kabita had likely encountered spiritual tourists in Kathmandu by virtue of *already having been* integrated in an environment where these are also present, and this might also be the case with Ankita. With the six other informants, there seems to be little or no traces of impact provided by the presence of spiritual tourism on the informants' religious *practice* as they presented it during the interviews. Emerging adults are in a vulnerable life stage, having to make potential life altering decisions. It is a crucial life stage for decisions regarding their religious and spiritual lives. According to the religious 'types' provided by Smith, at least six of the informants will be particularly receptive to changes in this life stage.

The informants did have several things in common with regards to their *ideas* about religious practice. All distanced themselves to some degree from their parents' religious practice, criticising how the rituals contained unhygienic or illogical elements. Several of them expressed an interest in learning more about their family's religious tradition, but they simultaneously emphasised that they wanted to know the *meaning* of things. They were not necessarily interested in the practice and the rituals, an emphasis which is also common to hear from spiritual tourists in Kathmandu. The next chapter will be based on these same conversations about religious practice, and bring about an analysis of how the ways in which the informants *talked about religion* could show tendencies of a *globalised religious discourse* possibly brought to Kathmandu by spiritual tourists.

Chapter 5: ‘Suddenly, it’s cool, you know! It’s cool, it’s different!’

Global religious practices and concepts in Kathmandu

Where the previous chapter presented the informants’ *religious practice*, this chapter will provide data on *how* the informants presented their religious practice and concepts.

Western spiritual tourists bring with them ideas about spirituality and religion attained in their country of origin. They commonly also bring with them a ‘global religious practice’.¹²⁴ This practice is distanced from the religious context it came from¹²⁵ and personalised by each individual practicing it. This very term ‘global religious practice’ can also be adopted to describe the practice of several of the informants. In this chapter I will dive deeper into what Brooke Schedneck has termed ‘global religious practice’ and look at its potential in relation to the informants’ religious practice and discourse. I will present an analysis of how the informants presented their religious practice and ideas of religious identity. Are there signs registered in the interview data and/or the observation material of an impact from ideas and discourses that may have been brought to Nepal by Western spiritual tourists? If decontextualised Asian religious practice is spreading via globalisation, and Kathmandu is becoming increasingly globalised, does this mean that a decontextualised religious practice is arriving in Kathmandu through foreign religious influence?

5.1 Religious trends in Kathmandu

Many spiritual tourists in Kathmandu place much emphasis on intellectual knowledge, and spend much time reading about philosophical themes.¹²⁶ They are rarely seen performing *pujas* in temples, offering food or money in holy sites, or carrying the prayer wheels around the white domes of the stupas. If noticed at all, these aspects are considered by many tourists as being more of an integrated part of the Nepali *culture*, rather than a part of the religious or spiritual conceptual area they view themselves as inhabitants of. A further demonstration of this can be made in a claim by Stausberg, of how ‘in many cases, contemporary religion is of little or no interest, or even perceived as a disturbance, while tourists enthusiastically flock to material remnants of past or alternative religious traditions.’¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Schedneck, “The Decontextualization of Asian Religious Practices”, 36.

¹²⁵ Schedneck, “The Decontextualization of Asian Religious Practices”, 36.

¹²⁶ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 164.

¹²⁷ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 140.

The tourists pay entrance fees to enter the large holy sites promoted in the tourist books, but most leave smaller temples on street corners, more frequently visited by Nepalis, unvisited. Many spiritual tourists also utilise a ‘pick and mix’ approach, which characterises a New Age orientalist approach to Asian traditions,¹²⁸ personalising a religious practice to suit one’s own interests. This entails disregarding the context and the belief systems in which the practice originated, to selectively choose which practice suits the individual herself. The very use of the term ‘spiritual’ preferred by so many of the tourists, entails positioning themselves a certain distance from the religious context in which the practice originated. They do not choose one religious system, but ‘pick and mix’ practices useful or beneficial to them in the given context.

Norman characterises this contemporary ‘spirituality’ by its personalised and malleable form, with less structured approaches to systems of practice.¹²⁹ Similarly, Carrette and King describe the privatisation of ‘Asian Wisdom Traditions’ by emphasising how these traditions have been translated into introspective spiritualities, whose main concerns are the achievements of individual enlightenment.¹³⁰

The ideas that these tourists bring with them when arriving in Kathmandu, their demands of spiritual centres offering courses on activities such as yoga and meditation, and the effort of people in Kathmandu to supply these tourists with what they want, are all expressions of a religious and spiritual *discourse* present in Kathmandu. Even though most of the informants have had little contact with spiritual tourism directly, they *have* been exposed to it by noticing the tourists’ presence and the city’s adaptation to their demands.

In schools, Nepalis are taught about other religions, such as Christianity and Islam, and most Nepalis I met assumed that as a European, I must be a Christian. Information in Nepal about spiritual practices in the West is less common, with the exception being that they keep seeing Westerners arrive to practice yoga, meditation, and go on retreats in their hometowns.

5.2 Global tendencies in informants’ description of religion and spirituality

How the informants chose to define what they meant by *religion* or *spirituality* had to be established early on in every interview. Asking them to compare their practice with that of their parents provided a clear idea of what parts of their religious background they were

¹²⁸ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 89.

¹²⁹ Norman, *Spiritual tourism*, 113.

¹³⁰ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 89.

critical of. Some of the data I will be referring to were parts of the material already presented in the previous chapter.

5.2.1 Defining ‘religion’ among the informants

Before asking questions about the informants’ religious practice, it was interesting to find out more about their perception of *what religion is*, and how they defined their own identity within these concepts. Having already had many conversations with spiritual tourists about this topic, I was interested in learning whether the Nepali informants would have very different or similar descriptions of what religion meant to them. I started by getting to know something about their family’s religious/non-religious history, through ‘Are you religious yourself?’ to ‘How would you practice (given) religion?’, after having established what term they preferred to describe their families’ tradition. These replies quickly turned into longer conversations in all interviews, as they wanted to describe to me what *they* meant when saying the word ‘religious’, possibly thinking that I would have different associations with the term. Prem said that:

Well, I am not that much religious, like other people. But I have my own way. I just remember God from my heart. I do visit some temples. But not like other people [who] when they go to worship, they carry, you know, the stuff [ritual objects] that are used for worshipping. (...). Like the Christians or Muslims, they go to their churches, they must do it, but we don’t have to go to such places like that. We go and we just remember from our hearts.

Comparing his practice with how he had interpreted Christian and Muslim practice, it seems he defined ‘religious’ as being part of an institution that demands of him to participate in religious activity at given times and places. Similar to his reply were Gyasten’s reflections:

I don’t consider myself as being very much religious, but I still believe in the religion, right. I believe in reincarnation and I believe in karma (...). So I avoid doing bad things, as a precaution. We believe that if we do bad things it will bring us some kind of bad happenings in life. So my aim for my religion is to not do anything bad that could harm others (...). That’s my main religion. This is the main aspect, or the gist of the religion (...) It is a philosophy as well as religion. It is a philosophy because there is much logics and reason behind it, right (...) It is a religion as well, because there are lots of followers, following the religion, or some aspect of the religion.

‘Religion’ in Gysten’s terms then also entails some idea of an institution, seeing that he distinguished religion from philosophy. *Philosophy*, to Gyasten, meant the logic and reason behind what they do, and *religion* he describes as the centre around which people gather to

follow a mutual cause or path. His comment about *karma* is also very interesting. He is saying that he tries to avoid ‘doing bad things’, because he believes it can bring consequences *in this life*. This is an idea resembling ‘instant karma’, the interpretation of karma often heard spoken colloquially in the West: “Good actions = immediate good karma”. It is also an interpretation of the karma-concept which aligns with the ‘engaged Buddhism’, ‘the name commonly given to modern movements that actively work to improve the lives of living beings(...)’.¹³¹ Gyasten being a Tibetan Buddhist, I perhaps expected him to say that he did good things to achieve a good *rebirth* rather than to achieve remuneration *in this* life.

Kabita was the only informant who described herself as being ‘spiritual’, rather than religious:

I’m not sure I am religious myself, but I follow all the religious traditions, because it is part of the culture. But I don’t really know what religion yet. As a person I am very spiritual. Even before I started reading Buddhist stuff, I was very spiritual in a very weird way, very connected to nature, something beyond, something out there. I don’t believe in God though, I don’t believe in the Hindu gods or goddesses. Superstitions, nope!

Modan and Sujana both discussed the word ‘atheist’ when referring to their relation to their family’s religion, but decided that neither of them felt it suited them. They did agree that they preferred the aspects of their religion which had some ‘logic reasoning’ behind it, and if they took part in rituals with their families which they saw as not having a logical foundation, they would start to discuss it with their families. Modan said that he did believe in God, but that to him ‘God is in doing good deeds and not just bowing in front of an idol’. His way of describing a puja ritual as ‘just bowing in front of an idol’ is very similar to descriptions given by very many spiritual tourists I have spoken with. Rituals such as those are parts of what many tourists avoid, saying it is more a part of culture than of the religion or spiritual endeavour they practice.

5.2.2 ‘I don’t really practice meditation, but I want to!’

The four informants Gyasten, Prem, Sujana, and Ram, who all said they did not practice meditation, all made interesting remarks worth a closer examination. Gyasten, Prem and Sujana said that no, they did not practice meditation. However all said that this was not because they had no interest in it, but rather that they currently did not have the time for it. Ram replied: ‘Never. But I am just lazy, that’s why.’ I was perhaps expecting them to say that

¹³¹ Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism*, 192.

they either practiced meditation or they did not, and I was surprised when they all elaborated on *why* they did not do this, somewhat apologetically. When asked if he would practice meditation, Gyasten replied:

No. No I don't. I don't meditate. But in the future maybe, maybe in the future. Since it is good for the health as well. Not only for the religious perspective, right. Especially for breathing problems and heart problems, it is considered to be good.

Similar to Gyasten's reply, Prem explained how he was very busy recently having become a father, but that he had used to learn some yoga techniques from TV programs in the mornings, and would practice those by himself.

I stepped into the parenthood. I wanted to do that [meditation/yoga], but I will definitely do that [again later], because meditation is very good for one's health! There are many meditation centres, you must have heard of some, one has to go for ten days or something like that, at Buddhanilkhanta¹³². I wanted to go there! But after I got married, I don't have time for that.

Sujan, with Modan confirming what he was saying, replied to the same question with a moment of silence before answering:

Nnnnot really. Before I used to do yoga, like, five years ago.. Aaaaand I would say it helped me a bit, but it never really interested me. Haha! And maybe it's always because it has been right in front of us the whole time, you know, you never really appreciate it when it is right there.

Modan did not comment on this, other than confirming what Sujan was saying. However later in the interview he did explain that his mother was practicing a sort of meditation while doing puja alone in the mornings. He would sometimes go to the same prayer room alone:

In the absence of my mum and dad, I do it. But I don't stay for two hours; I just stay for half an hour. But it is still like meditation, you have the whole thing to yourself.

These replies caused me to reflect on why it seemed as though they strongly wanted to practice meditation, or at least wanted to communicate that they wanted to. There might also be a methodological challenge present; did my question lead them to believe that I was expecting them to be interested in meditation? The question was simply phrased: 'Have you ever tried meditation or yoga?' The informants, knowing that Europeans in Kathmandu often are interested in practicing meditation and yoga, might have placed me in that same category

¹³² Buddhanilkhanta is an area where the Dharmashringa meditation centre is located. It attracts mostly Newar Buddhist, both young and old, but also foreigners with particular interests in *Vipassana* meditation. Toffin, *Monarchy to Republic*, 136.

as spiritual tourists, and not wanted to disappoint me. There is a great deal of centres offering mediation courses in Kathmandu, and they are highly visible if one enters the tourist zones, which are continuously expanding. Could there be a felt pressure among young people in Kathmandu to attend or show an interest in these sorts of exercises? Prem claimed that many of his relatives had gone to retreats, and he wanted to do the same. Some Nepalis did attend some of the yoga and meditation courses I participated in, and these were all in some way linked with the milieu around spiritual tourists and students of Buddhism in Boudha. I have however never seen any advertisements in the Nepali language recruiting people to come to their centres.¹³³ The ones displayed on streets or in pamphlets in cafés were always written in English.

5.2.3 Sanskrit, science, and the ‘pizza effect’

Among the informants, there seemed to be an emphasis on the oldest texts, preferably those written in Sanskrit. Sujan expressed it like this when describing how he had never really learnt how to perform the Hindu rituals: ‘I have never really learnt how to do things that way. Also because I have not studied Sanskrit, so reading the texts is very, very difficult for me. So following the traditions would be a challenge.’ Sujan obviously felt that to truly learn and understand the Hindu rituals, one would first have to be able to read Sanskrit, even though most texts have been translated, both to English and to Nepali. By saying this, he is also emphasising the *scriptural* traditions, saying that he could not do things correctly unless he was able to *read* about it first. This emphasis on the *written word* gives some associations with Western Protestant understandings of religion. Modan said that:

Things that used to be based on religious myths are now proven to be scientifically correct – like biting a twig from a Neem tree! Now it is proven that the Neem tree is good for your health. (..) If you want to understand Hinduism, you have to go to the base. The Rigveda and the Vedic period. It is directly from Sanskrit, the mother of all languages.

This is in great contrast with what Gellner reported from Kathmandu in 2001, where he claims that ‘Newars think of religion primarily in terms of ritual practices’.¹³⁴ This demonstrates one of the ways in which emerging adults are distancing themselves, consciously or not, from the traditions of their parents. Ram several times during the interview mentioned what he called ‘the pure Hindu religion’, where he felt there were many

¹³³ From my stays in Nepal, I have learnt to read and understand some Nepali, at least enough to understand the contents of pamphlets and posters.

¹³⁴ Gellner, *The Anthropology of Buddhism and Hinduism*, 93.

boundaries, compared to contemporary Hindu practice: ‘Now you can do whatever you want!’. This is an interesting comment he makes, as he seemed somewhat frustrated with the fact that more is now being accepted within the boundaries of Hinduism. Simultaneously, he spoke negatively about the strict ways of conducting rituals in *the pure Hindu religion*. It could seem that he is somehow caught in between not really having the knowledge or interest to perform the rituals the way his parents have been doing, but neither being OK with how Hinduism is opening up for new ways of being practiced. Kabita, when talking about what Buddhism meant to her, explained that:

After my education in the west and everything, I was starting to question the meaning of life, you know. I was losing my own roots. For me my roots were Buddhism. For me now, Buddhism is basically questioning everything. The Buddhism I knew before was ritual stuff, the cultural stuff, you know. Now I am understanding the actual practice stuff, what it means to follow your guru.

Gysten, when talking about spiritual tourists, said:

I see that many tourists are interested in doing meditation, much influenced by Buddhism. So they want to learn more. They want to learn more and explore. They find it very interesting how the popularity of Buddhism is based on the fact that it has some back-up by some reason, right.

It is striking how the informants are speaking somewhat negatively about the ritual practice, and how they are emphasising the use of Sanskrit. Using words such as ‘the base’ and ‘pure’ gives associations to the modern Buddhism that came to the West after the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893 in Chicago, through both Buddhist reformers and Western Buddhist enthusiasts.¹³⁵ Then, rationality and science were emphasised as being the very foundation of Buddhism. In the case of Buddhism on Sri Lanka, most ritual practice was considered by the reformers as being backwards and a deterioration of the true Buddhism, while modern Buddhism was considered a ‘return to the origin.’¹³⁶ Religious leaders were the ones to bring with them and promote this form of Buddhism in the West, and the philosophical, rational and scientific aspects of Buddhism are often still being emphasised in school books.¹³⁷ Many spiritual tourists arriving in Kathmandu arrive precisely with knowledge based on this modern Buddhism, often wanting to visit its ‘spaces of origin’. This

¹³⁵ Jones, “Marketing Buddhism in the USA”, 215.

¹³⁶ Lopez, *Modern Buddhism*, xi.

¹³⁷ For a case study on this subject, see Thobro, “Endringer i representasjoner av buddhisme” (2009)

modern Buddhism is still very evident in Western Buddhists' understanding of Buddhist terms and concept.¹³⁸

Most spiritual tourists I encountered during fieldwork wanted to learn more about Buddhism. Some did not call it by the name of a religion, but described their practice as *finding their own spiritual path* or something similar. If these tourists are bringing with them a form of modern Buddhism, we might be talking about a *pizza effect* happening, where an element is taken out of its original context, adapted to its new context, then again returned to its space of origin, having been 're-enculturated'.¹³⁹ Van der Veer claims that there are no doubt traces of spirituality tracing back a very long time, but that the modern spirituality that is increasing today is something profoundly *modern*.¹⁴⁰ In another article, van der Veer claims to see that the same is true of yoga specifically. He argues that it *is* an ancient system of breathing and body exercises, but that it has been reformed and transformed to being integrated in global ideas of health and 'good living' in today's modern society.¹⁴¹ The yoga practiced in most popular centres today has its origins from an imperial modernity mediated by the English language.¹⁴² Highly educated members of the Indian middle class migrated to USA in the 1970's and 1980's and were met with the marketing of an Indian spirituality in health, exercise, and management markets. This was in turn brought back to India¹⁴³ and with the opening of gates to mass tourism, it was also brought to Nepal.

All the informants, when speaking of Buddhism, brought up either the word 'peace' or 'harmony' or both. Several of them described Buddha as 'a symbol of peace'. Gyasten explained how spiritual tourism could not only bring an improvement in Nepal's economy, but said that he thought it could also bring more harmony into the country, seeing that 'somebody meditating would never bring any harm to a society'. To the same question about the role of spiritual tourists in Kathmandu, Prem replied:

The main thing is that Buddhism tells us about peace. So in today's world, everyone needs peace.

That is the main thing of Buddhism. And I think it is because of THAT that everyone is so interested in it.

Relaxation and 'peace of mind' are often motives for spiritual practice among spiritual tourists, and many centres promote their classes or retreats through this discourse. If these are

¹³⁸ For a case study on this subject, see Svarstad, "Nordmenn si tilflukt i dei tre juvelar." (2014)

¹³⁹ Bharati, "The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns", 273.

¹⁴⁰ Van der Veer, "Spirituality in Modern Society", 1097.

¹⁴¹ Van der Veer, "Global Breathing", 316.

¹⁴² Van der Veer, "Global Breathing", 325.

¹⁴³ Van der Veer, "Global Breathing", 326.

new aspects of spirituality that have not been incorporated into the informants' knowledge of religion through their parents, could it be that it comes from seeing these centres and encountering tourists participating in them? These Nepali emerging adults are not static recipients of change, but part of a dynamic and shifting religious discourse, impacted by globalisation, as much as they are impacting it themselves. Interfaces between tourists and host communities will always be mediated, and there can never be a 'pure' encounter with no mutual impact.¹⁴⁴

5.3 'Why is Buddhism so hip?'

This headline was used in an article posted in BBC Religion and Ethics, May 2014, and is surely a question worthy of some attention.¹⁴⁵ The popularity of Buddhism in the West, and in large parts all over the world, has grown immensely since it was first introduced, and it has been widely represented in popular movies and literature. It has been adopted by celebrities for decades, gaining it even more publicity in the trendy crowds. Meditation is the practice most commonly associated with Buddhism in the West, and there are countless books on the topic. Most of the books about Buddhism sold in bookshops are non-sectarian ones, not associated with one specific branch of Buddhism.¹⁴⁶ Many of these are also self-help books based on Buddhist principles.¹⁴⁷

When asking my Nepali informants about why they thought Westerners came to Nepal to study Buddhism, which according to the statistics is mainly a Hindu country, most replied by explaining how those who wanted to study Hinduism preferred going to India instead. However Rin-che made a very interesting comment:

Because Westerners come from Christian countries, they come here, see Hinduism, and they think: 'Oh, it's just Gods again!' But Buddhism, it's different. God is not your boss. You are accepting the religion in a different way. And Buddhism is not just a religion, it is so, so, so much more!

This is also very typical way of describing Buddhism among spiritual tourists. None of the spiritual tourists I spoke with placed Buddhism in the category of 'religion', but described it as a 'way of life' or a philosophy. However I do believe that the spiritual tourists coming to Nepal normally know what they are looking for, and are not confused when they see that

¹⁴⁴ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 193.

¹⁴⁵ Skilton, "Why is Buddhism so hip?"

¹⁴⁶ Jones, "Marketing Buddhism in the USA", 218.

¹⁴⁷ Jones, "Marketing Buddhism in the USA", 218.

Hinduism is ‘just gods again’. Most come to see and experience the Asia they have been reading about in literature and seen in movies, and because others have established a market for this exact demand in Kathmandu, most find what they are looking for. A point worth some emphasis is how the majority of Western spiritual tourists in Nepal are mainly interested in *Tibetan* Buddhism. Their first choice of a spiritual destination might then be Tibet itself, but due to political tension in China, tourists travelling to Tibet are very restricted in their journeys. Studying Buddhism in Nepal might be just a second alternative to Tibet.

Tibetan Buddhism has shown signs of resurgence in several Asian countries, although not much is written about this topic as of yet. In an interview with *the Journal of the International Institute* in 2000, Daniel Lopez claimed that Tibetan Buddhism might be replacing Zen Buddhism as the most popular and exotic religious practice in the West.¹⁴⁸ There are also signs of this happening in Asian countries, where Nepal is not an exception. News articles show signs of this being the case in parts of China¹⁴⁹ and Yamamoto writes that Tibetan Buddhism had a resurgence in Mongolia in the 1990s.¹⁵⁰ The same is described with regards to Taiwan, India and Nepal in the book ‘TransBuddhism: Transition, Translation, Transformation’ (2009).¹⁵¹ But also groups of Theravada Buddhists are growing in numbers, and comprise an undercurrent of a Buddhist revival in Nepal.¹⁵² Whilst conducting fieldwork, I came across researcher Cameron Warner, who has been studying changes to religious identity and practice among Buddhists in Nepal, with special attention to caste and conversion, among high-castes and Tamangs since 2012. A publication from this research is forthcoming.¹⁵³

5.3.1 Expert interview with Buddhist leader

One of my expert informants was a *khenpo*, with whom I discussed the role of Buddhism in Nepal today. Among other themes, we discussed the courses offered to the international students coming to his institution to learn about Buddhism. This college had previously offered a summer course in Buddhism to international students, but due to a decrease in the number of applicants the last years, this programme had been cut temporarily. When asked about reasons for the decline in interest, the *khenpo* replied that there were many

¹⁴⁸ Brereton, Bonnie, “An interview with Donald Lopez”

¹⁴⁹ See, for instance: MacLeod, “In China, tensions rising over Buddhism’s quiet resurgence.”

¹⁵⁰ Yamamoto, *Buddhism, Taoism, and Other far Eastern Religions*, 13.

¹⁵¹ Bhushan, Garfield, Zablocki, *TransBuddhism: Transition, Translation, Transformation*, 2.

¹⁵² Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism*, 183.

¹⁵³ Warner, untitled material.

misconceptions among foreigners about ‘what Buddhism actually was’. He said that many who had come to the summer course had first been exposed to Buddhism via TV and movies in the West, and that when they came to Nepal to practice, many were disappointed and confused with the Buddhism they were introduced to. He described what they wanted to practice as a ‘feel-good Buddhism’, while he described what they taught at the college as ‘core Buddhism’. When having been introduced to this *core Buddhism*, many of the international students had quit the programme.

The khenpo thought many of the students were continuing their Buddhist education in other institutions in Nepal, who had started offering something that more closely resembled the *feel-good* Buddhism they were expecting to find. He explained that he disliked the way the students wanted there to be an *easy way* to enlightenment, describing how hard ‘true Buddhist practice’ actually could be. He explained this by saying that there had been some, but very few enlightened beings in this world, and if the path to enlightenment was easy, there would have been a lot more enlightened beings worldwide.

The term ‘feel-good’ utilised by the khenpo is also mentioned by Carrette and King, who argue that ‘spirituality’ provides this all-important factor, while the term ‘religion’ for many is tainted with a negative image.¹⁵⁴ It is thus perhaps the ‘spiritual’ aspects of Buddhism that these tourists are searching for, when arriving at the institution.

The khenpo also mentioned how he felt there was a renewed pride of Buddhism arising in Nepal, where Nepalis were starting to show more interest in the Buddhist history of their country. This he was sure would show on the next census registering the religious distribution in Nepal. He also described a T-shirt I have also witnessed very many Nepalis wearing, which has an image of the Buddha, along with the text: ‘Buddha was born in Nepal’, which he felt was an element of the same process. He pointed to examples such as an increased promotion of Lumbini as a tourists site, which is the city in which the Buddha was born, south in Nepal. This is an example that Stephen C. Berkwitz also makes, when referring to a current Buddhist revival in Nepal.¹⁵⁵ Berkwitz claims that ‘[i]mproved Buddhist education and more opportunities for lay practice in the form of meditation centres and social activism promises to contribute to the growth of Buddhism in Nepal.’¹⁵⁶ Making meditation practices available to Nepalis in Kathmandu could in other words contribute to the current process where Buddhism in Nepal is experiencing a revival.

¹⁵⁴ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 134.

¹⁵⁵ Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism*, 182.

¹⁵⁶ Berkwitz, *South Asian Buddhism*, 184.

5.4 *Najiko tirtha hela*

Modan and Sujan introduced a Nepali proverb during their interview, and with it brought up the element of ‘nostalgia’. This came up when Sujan was talking about meditation: ‘(...) maybe it’s because it has been right in front of us the whole time, you know, you never really appreciate it when it is right there.’ To this, Modan added:

You know, in Nepal there is a saying, it says ‘Najiko tirtha hela’¹⁵⁷. Tirtha means pilgrimage, narsi means near, like ‘the nearest pilgrimage to you, you will never go there’. You always go to pilgrimages far away. That’s why I like – it’s the same thing here. We have it all here, but we don’t do it. But people from outside, they come here.

Sujan elaborated on this by telling a story about how when he studied in London, a non-Hindu friend of his wanted to go to a Hindu temple, where he himself had not even thought of going:

Then even I was so excited, you know! Like I had never been to a temple before! Yes so when everything is right there in front of you, you never really appreciate it fully you know. (...) Like you said, meditation and yoga as well, you know. We have always seen it right in front of us, so we never could really appreciate it.

After having been thoroughly distanced from the traditions he was used to in Nepal while being in London, he then reflected upon going to a Hindu temple, and felt an excitement triggered by being reminded of this tradition by a non-Hindu friend. Later on in the interview, when talking about how spiritual tourism could impact young people in Nepal today, Modan brought this element up again:

As you [talking to Sujan] said earlier, the thing that is closest to you, you will never appreciate it, you know. And we’ve always.. people have always.. We have grown up looking at places that practically, we cannot go to. Or looking at people we cannot meet, you know. And when we see these trends [spiritual tourism in Kathmandu], suddenly.. it’s cool, you know! It’s cool. It’s different!

Schedneck writes about this same topic in relation to encounters between cultures and religions due to increased globalisation:

¹⁵⁷ Modan and Sujan spelt the proverb down like this during the interview: नजिकको देउता हेल, टदको देउता मेल। (‘Najiko deuta/tirtha hela, tadhako deuta/tirtha melaa’, and translated it to ‘You neglect the God who is close, you pay homage to the God that is far away.’)

The rapid transference and constant migrations of people, images, ideas, and commodities has brought increased contact with alternative religious beliefs and practices. Religions and cultures encounter one another and are reinterpreted in the process. *Often discourses of globalization evoke nostalgia for premodern identities, a search for 'authenticity', and fear of the loss of tradition.* Globalization also allows for a way of disseminating parts of religious traditions outside of traditional religious communities.” (Emphasis added)¹⁵⁸

The article being mainly about the decontextualisation of Asian religious practice *in the West*, it is to Western people she writes that ‘nostalgia for premodern identities’ is evoked. The data material from the informants indicates that this is the case also among emerging adult Nepalis living in Kathmandu in two ways: Nepalis are also being globalised through the migrations of people and ideas, and are included in these encounters, just as much, if not even more intensely than those in the West. Emerging adults are becoming distanced from the traditions of their previous generations, and this could evoke a sense of displacement and a ‘fear of the loss of tradition’. Through globalisation and the waves of new trends and discourses arriving in Kathmandu, including the large group of spiritual tourists, they might start to feel *too* distanced from their parents’ religious traditions, perhaps enough to start seeking back to their families’ religious origins. Toffin argues that a sense of loss of social customs is deeply entrenched in local feelings’, and that this is the result of the radical reshaping of Nepal’s culture.¹⁵⁹ The other way this nostalgia could be evoked is through seeing foreigners doing what they themselves have abandoned, like Sujana did in London. This might inspire them to try something they have not tried before, and that has *always been right there in front of them*. When the informants were asked what they felt when seeing Westerners practicing an altered version of Asian religions, they all responded positively, that this evoked only good feelings, seeing other people show interest in their tradition, culture and religion.

If this is the case, spiritual tourism might actually have the potential of stimulating and even encouraging religious activity among emerging adults in Kathmandu, contrasting the assumption that tourism *in general* has a secularising effect.

It is less clear what *kind* of religious activity it could stimulate to. Another issue is whether or not it really *has* been right in front of them the whole time. Many of the practices offered in the centres are based on older techniques, but most of the exercises the spiritual centres offer are relatively recent ones, and most centres have opened during the last decade

¹⁵⁸ Schedneck, “Decontextualization of Asian Religious Practices”, 36.

¹⁵⁹ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 38.

or two. If nostalgia were to encourage Nepalis to join *these* centres and practice the same globalised practices that spiritual tourists do, it would entail a change in religious practice in Kathmandu entirely.

5.5 A secularised religious practice

Van der Veer discusses the term ‘secular’ alongside his discussion on *spirituality*. He claims that the two terms have been produced simultaneously and in mutual interaction.¹⁶⁰ Many researchers have argued that tourism in general has a secularising effect on host communities. I argue that *spiritual tourism* was possibly left out of the definition of ‘tourism’ when this conclusion was reached. Stausberg discusses the topic of tourism’s secularising effect with some scepticism. He claims that few studies, although some prominent researchers such as Erik Cohen, Timothy Dallen, and Daniel Olsen actually support the hypothesis that tourism leads to secularisation of host communities.¹⁶¹ There is not much doubt as to whether or not tourism *commercialises* religion – in Kathmandu it most certainly does, but it does not automatically follow that commercialisation leads to secularisation.¹⁶² In several examples presented in research in this field, tourists often seem to arrive at their tourist destination with drugs and alcohol and a general bad influence, which is luckily not always the case. Most spiritual tourists whom I encountered had travelled to Nepal to escape a culture often associated with these negative aspects, and some will try and avoid these things as a part of their spiritual practice. In addition, if nostalgia could be playing the role as suggested in the previous paragraph, the secularising effect of *spiritual* tourism could possibly be rejected, at least in the case of Kathmandu.

When discussing the decontextualising of *yoga* from its culturally specific belief-system in Asia, Carrette and King claim that it is not actually being *decontextualised* into a ‘free floating state’, but rather that it is being ‘recoded in the terms of modern psychological discourse and the individualist values of the Western society from which that mindset originates.’ This results in yoga being ‘secularised, de-traditionalised and oriented exclusively toward the individual.’¹⁶³ Precisely the secular aspect of yoga is according to Carrette and King largely what has made it so popular.¹⁶⁴ Neither of the informants spoke of yoga as being a specifically religious practice, but rather as a scientific method beneficial to their health.

¹⁶⁰ Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, 36

¹⁶¹ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 46.

¹⁶² Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, in note 41: p. 233.

¹⁶³ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 117.

¹⁶⁴ Carrette and King, *Selling Spirituality*, 117.

Tourists bringing with them decontextualised, recoded, and possibly *secularised* practices such as yoga and meditation, could be said to be increasing the popularity of a ‘secular’ activity. It is from this possible to argue that single practices gaining popularity in Kathmandu, such as yoga and meditation in centres, have become more ‘secular’. A general secular influence on the host community from tourists is more difficult to find grounds for, and particularly when looking exclusively at *spiritual* tourism.

5.5 Chapter conclusion and summary

The spiritual practices Western spiritual tourists bring with them or seek out when arriving in Kathmandu, are many times practices that have originally been an integrated part of Asian religions. They have later been decontextualised and adapted to their current use within health and wellbeing discourses in the West today. The Nepali informants all exhibited similarities with religious or spiritual discourses that are present among spiritual tourists in Kathmandu, in their ways of speaking about religion and religious practices. These similarities were evident both with regards to their thoughts on yoga and meditation, and how they defined ‘religiosity’. These could be the results of an impact from the presence of spiritual tourists and the centres opened to meet their demands. Separating ‘religion’ and ‘philosophy’, defining religion as something opposing ‘logic and reasoning’, and emphasising scriptural knowledge, were the most striking of these similarities. Spiritual tourists mainly arrive with the intention of seeking out Buddhist practices. Several researchers, in addition to the khenpo, have detected a trend where Tibetan Buddhism is experiencing a resurgence in Asian countries. Spiritual tourists might be following a trend that is already happening in Nepal. It is also possible that they are contributing to Buddhism becoming more popular because their demands require an increase in the number of Buddhist institutions offering courses to both foreigners and locals.

Nostalgia might trigger the informants to try out something they never thought about trying before, because ‘it has always been there’, or it could perhaps make them consider learning more about the religion of their parents, which all of them had created a certain distance from.

Chapter 6: Encounters

Contact zones between spiritual tourism and the host community

During fieldwork I observed ways in which spiritual tourists chose locations for spiritual practice, and how some of them interacted with the host community. Boudha is an obvious ‘contact zone’, where Western Buddhists studying Tibetan Buddhism communicate with locals. However I also want to take a step back and look at the whole of Kathmandu as being a contact zone between spiritual tourism and host community, where tourists are never separated from the greater whole. Shops, restaurants, cafés, entertainment sites, religious sites and various centres all adapt to the demands of those willing to pay for what they are offering. Religious festivals are among the events where Nepalis participate with tourists as audiences. The tourist market in Kathmandu has no doubt learnt that *religion sells*, and they are providing variations of what their customers want, whatever it is they are offering. What was most important to me during fieldwork was giving the host community a say on the topic of tourism, as most of the research on this topic has previously made with the tourist being the main focus. In the first part of this chapter I will be presenting the data on what the informants responded to questions regarding spiritual tourism, and their encounters with it, before I take a step back to analyse other possible ways in which Nepalis in Kathmandu are encountering spiritual tourism.

6.1 Eight emerging adults’ view of spiritual tourism in Kathmandu

In the nature of the semi-structured interview, questions were not asked in the exact same phrasing in each interview, and for this reason I choose to present the data through general themes. Some did not reply much to one topic, while others may even have answered follow-up question. Some of the answers also came as parts of replies to other questions, but will still be included under the theme-headings. I chose to ask the questions in general terms, not using *you*, but rather *young Nepalis*, implicitly meaning the informants, and hopefully encouraging them to reflect on Kathmandu as a whole *and* their role in it. The interviews that were recorded are presented with their replies in quote marks, and where I only made notes, the replies as I noted them down during the interviews are included without quote marks:

6.1.1 Contact with spiritual tourists?

Kabita : ‘In America, yes! I met lots of kids there looking for religion.’

Ankita: Not much, but yes, from the retreats and different courses.

- Gyasten: 'Some.' He had registered that they are there to learn more about Buddhism and meditate.
- Prem: 'Well.. I.. Actually, I don't have any contacts, but I have met them. Those who have been following Buddhism. I have *seen* them, but personally I haven't had any contact with them. '
- Ram: Have had no link with them. Mostly had contact with Indians and Muslims.

It did turn out throughout the interviews that all informants had observed and registered the presence of spiritual tourists, although not all had been in direct contact with any. The fact that both Gyasten and Prem specified that the tourists were there for *Buddhism*, signals that they have identified what most of them do when they are in Kathmandu, and that Buddhism is in fact their main interest. Rin-che made no specific comment about this, but living in Boudha and studying with many Westerners, he has definitely been in contact with some. Modan and Sujana have had extensive contact with spiritual tourists, mainly because of the location of Modan's family's guest house. Kabita and Ankita both made it clear that they had not only been in contact with, but had also practiced alongside spiritual tourists. In Kabita's case both in America and in Kathmandu, and in Ankita's case it was mostly through retreats near Kathmandu.

6.1.2 Opinions about spiritual tourists?

- Kabita: 'In America it [practicing spiritual activities] could be a fashion thing, or it could be so even here. They might be doing it for the show. I have met a bunch of people like that.'
- Gyasten: 'It is a trend as much as it is an interest, right. Some people do these practices because they hear about it from others, right. But there are some tourists who do lots of studies before doing this. They are very much influenced by this or that kind of practice of Buddhism, so they want to be one hundred percent involved, they are sure it will bring good things for them. But there is another part of this as well, new people in the trend want to imitate the others. So it is a trend as much as it is a practice from within.'
- Prem: 'It was strange for me to see them before. I can see many of them. That's why I'm now getting used to it.'

Ram: Tourist season clashes with the Hindu festivals, so people have to work, and this can disturb the religious festival seasons, as Hindus can't go visit their families in villages outside Kathmandu.

It is particularly interesting how Kabita and Gyasten both talked about the *motivation* of spiritual tourists, and *why* they are interested in the practice, how spiritual practice can be seen as 'trendy'. Gyasten also seemed to imply that there are different levels of commitment among them, that some are only doing it because it is trendy, while others are truly devoted and involved. Prem's reply showed that the presence of spiritual tourists either has become more visible, or that he has just gotten more used to spiritual tourists in Kathmandu by being exposed to them over time. A combination of the two is most likely the case. Ram's reply showed a beginning reflection on the impact of the presence of tourists, although he might have been talking about all tourists *in general* at this point, as spiritual tourists alone would not maintain the whole tourist market of Kathmandu. Many shop and restaurant owners travel home to their villages for the religious festivals, and even in the normally very busy Thamel, the streets are considerably quieter during festivals.

6.1.3 Could spiritual tourism have an impact on young people in Kathmandu?

Kabita: 'I am shocked at how spiritual tourists make such a big effort to come here. I wish this could happen in Nepal. It is a third world mentality, people want to get out of here and go to the 'land of opportunity'.' (...) 'I think when Nepalis see white people, anything you do is already superior, you have white skin, so you have dollars. It is a colonial mentality. I might be wrong, but this is my impression. If Nepali people see that foreigners are doing this, I think some of them will be encouraged, but not have the means to *do it*, right? Because even if they *want* to study religion, their parents would probably not accept it. It's like.. why would you want to study *music*, you know. It's the same thing. If spiritual tourists didn't come, I don't know, maybe it wouldn't be much difference. But it also might do. White people ruled the world before, you know, from this perspective, there is lots of colonial thinking still. But it depends what side of society you are from. There are lots of rich people and poor people in Nepal. I cannot know how a poor family would react seeing a white person practicing.'

Rin-che: No, Nepalis are too busy with their other occupations. They don't understand Buddhism the way it actually is. But when people see a Westerner dressed as a monk, they are shocked! And they are inspired! It makes them want to practice their religion better. Many people actually think that: These people are coming here, and they are rich and smart, so it must be a good thing that they are studying!

- Gyasten: 'I can see that there is a positive impact. A positive impact. One thing is that religious tourism is a part of the tourism sector, right. So the people involved in the tourism business and the local people as well, they can benefit. If one tourist is coming for the meditation purpose or something like that, he has to stay with the host community, at a hotel or a lodge or something like that. Nobody will host him for free of course, so he is paying something and he is contributing something to the tourism sector of Nepal. So especially the youth, they can see some business opportunity there. There are lots of meditation centres or yoga centres, centres targeting those tourists coming here for meditation purposes. It is a small segment of the tourism in Nepal, but one that the youth can benefit from.'
- Modan: [talking about a sacrifice I and a group of other Westerners got to participate in, when discussing the question of impact from spiritual tourism] Yeah I learnt a lot about the sacrifice, like, things I never learnt before, that I never cared to learn before. But then I had to translate it to you at that time. And I don't know, like the priest he told me a lot of things. And actually, it even made *him* think about it. Normally, nobody is asking him questions, like, about what he is doing! Nobody questions him. But I told him before, 'there will be foreigners coming', so I think he studied a bit as well, before he came. Because, yeah, he didn't want to look like a fool!
- Sujan: [answering Modan] Yeah! I mean, when it is just us talking, we don't talk about religion, we never talk about that! 'Consequences of religion in the modern society', haha! Because, why? It is not relevant, you know! But when it is someone else, especially from another culture and religion coming to talk about it, it is suddenly a very interesting topic, you know!
- Modan: [talking about a group of European students he got to know after a mutual European friend asked if he could bring them along to the sacrifice dedicated to his engagement, where after they spent time with his family and came to visit several times.] '[T]hey're all doing Sanskrit, and they want to see a goat sacrifice, they are going to places, they are going to temples, they are spending time with my mum! Like, *najiko tirtha hela*, my mum has been praying every morning, and I don't even bother to wake up in the morning and see what she is doing up there. And there are like, people coming all the way from [country], and they are taking their time to go in the morning with my mum. I think there have been five people who have been coming to see the morning puja now, and I was like 'Okeeeey', it's like the knowledge of Sanskrit again going back to where it actually came from. It is really good!'

Kabita, Rin-che and Gyasten all clearly associated ‘spiritual tourist’ with *economy*. ‘You have white skin, so you have dollars’, Kabita said, when talking of a *colonial mentality* she saw as being present in Kathmandu. She and Rin-che’s responses are somewhat similar, in that they are both actually explicitly *hoping* that spiritual tourism will have an impact on Nepalis. Kabita’s and Rin-che’s comments on how it could encourage people to *study* religion might be telling of how she defines religion. If locals were to be more interested in religion, in Kabita’s word, they would then want to *study* it. The emphasis on reading scriptures and *studying* religions has long been evident in many Western countries, and her emphasis on this might be due to her role in the milieu in Boudha. Rin-che’s slightly negatively loaded comment about Nepalis not really understanding Buddhism, saying that they could be ‘inspired’ by Westerners dressed as monks, indicates that he welcomes this trend in Kathmandu and the potential changes it could entail.

Kabita brought up how parents normally would not accept their children studying religion, as we had previously discussed, but this time adding that it might make a difference if these had seen ‘white people’ doing the same, depending on ‘what side of society’ they are from. Was she then insinuating, similar to Rin-che, that seeing Westerners practicing ‘their’ (Nepalis’) religion could increase the status of this practice in Kathmandu altogether? If this were the case, the next generation could grow up with parents being more positively inclined towards them seeking to be closer to their religious background. With her indication that wealthy and poor families would view ‘white people practicing’ differently, she placed herself outside of this reflection, looking into the Nepali society divided by access to wealth.

In chapter five, the aspect of *nostalgia* was considered as a contributor to a possible impact from spiritual tourism on Nepali, emerging adults. From the replies to this question, an alternative interpretation can be drawn: If seeing Westerners practicing a religion one has or previously had an association with can *inspire* a person to try practicing it themselves, it might not just be elements of *nostalgia* playing a role, but also a conscious motivation to increase one’s status by practicing what the foreigners do. If more data were to suggest that the khenpo was correct in his assumptions, it would be very interesting to consider spiritual tourism as a motivator or inspiration behind these conversions.

Modan and Sujana reflected upon on their own roles in a possible process of impact by spiritual tourism. The group they mentioned were European students of religion, asking questions and participating in rituals. It is interesting that *these* were the ones he immediately thought of when I had phrased the question to being about ‘spiritual tourism’. Even *I* as an interviewer was included in their response, as Sujana mentioned how they would never talk

about religion when it was just the two of them, but being questioned about it made it seem much more interesting. Modan saying that the priest also would have studied before coming to perform the ritual, because there were ‘foreigners coming’, indicates that people are very aware of what ‘foreigners’ will ask and want to know. Modan again mentioned the phrase ‘*najiko tirtha hela*’. Seeing others practicing what has originally been close to him the whole time may have made him feel that *he* should have spent more time with his mother in the mornings or learnt more Sanskrit, like the visitors did. Saying that he appreciated Sanskrit ‘going back to where it actually came from’ is perhaps the pizza effect demonstrated. With this reflection, it seems as though he feels that the ‘knowledge of Sanskrit’ has been missing in Nepal for some time, and that it is now returning through foreign interest in these themes.

6.1.4 Spiritual tourism: Positive or negative?

Kabita: ‘I think positive. It might seem positive, but it might be negative also. Because there is so much spiritual materialism, you can just shop for gurus. ‘Hey I am lost in life, what to do, I have so much money, I don’t know what to do’. They see lots of white kids doing it, so they start doing it, but not *really* doing it. Tibetan Buddhism looks so colourful and attractive. Especially Tibetan Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is very different.’

Ankita: Positive! It could be a turning point for our nation, we could also attract more people from other Asian countries for pilgrimage. Only a positive impact from spiritual tourism. If it were to have a negative impact, it would be within politics. [Ankita here told a story about the erection of a Buddhist statue, which politicians stopped after some controversy about the site which was both Hindu and Buddhist.] Hindu politicians might not be too impressed. But Buddha is a symbol of peace. I see no harm! It would bring more knowledge and awareness. There was nobody to teach me about Buddhism in my teenage years.

Gyasten: ‘Positive impact because of the financial aspect and the economy. Another thing is the harmony in society, right. Harmony! The meditator won’t do bad things in society, we have to respect them, help them or assist them. This will bring some kind of harmony as well.’ (...) ‘It might have a negative impact also, but until now I have not experienced any of that, but I can give many examples of things happening in India. There are lots of gurus, haha, they are regarded as spiritual leaders, but now lots of things are coming up, right.. But in Nepal we haven’t had this experience at all, not at all.’

Prem: [The question was asked quite differently to Prem, where I have asked: ‘Seeing them practice Buddhism, do you think it’s a good thing?’ His response is the reply to this

question.] ‘Yes it is! Definitely it is! I don’t know about the Westerners, but many people just pretend to be a monk or something. Being a monk is just not necessary, just follow the teachings of Buddha!’

(...) ‘Nowadays, people are globally coming for Buddhism. It is so good for the country, for the people. The people from Nepal should also learn the good parts of Buddhism. In their real life, not just read the textbooks, but practically, they should do good things. They shouldn’t follow all the things, but some good parts, that will make everyone good, also making the world a better place, we can make it heaven!’

Sujan: ‘Well I have always believed that tourism plays a positive role, at least it *has played* a positive role, you know. ‘Cus with me for instance, I’m not really interested in religion myself, I mean, I know the basic stuff, but I wouldn’t really want to pressure my parents and ask them continuously about it. But if I know that my friends are coming over, you know, I would want to be prepared. Or if I interact with some tourist, someone not from my religion, I would like to know more. And yeah, it has played a positive impact! For myself you know, I’ve learnt a lot about religion in the past 6 months or so, since I have had lots of interaction with people who are really interested in religion, which generally interested me as well. Things that I don’t know, I try to find out what’s.. Why it’s done, you know, just to be able to answer my friends. So yeah, it has helped in that way as well.’

Kabita seemed to assume that if Nepalis started practicing what they observed Westerners doing, they would not ‘really be doing it’. It is not clear whether she means that by contrast, the Westerners *are* doing it the right way, but she does seem to make a distinction between the two.

All informants replied that they found spiritual tourism to play a positive role in Kathmandu. It must also be considered that Ram, Prem, Gyasten, and Modan (even though he did not reply to this exact question) all work in businesses that directly or indirectly financially depend on the tourism industry. As some of these mention the obvious financial aspect to what these tourists bring with them to Nepal, it is natural to assume that their positive attitude towards the tourist industry is influenced by their financial link with them. A study conducted in Nadi, with a large group of respondents from the host community, showed that these expressed a ‘very positive attitude towards tourism’.¹⁶⁵ The respondents had been asked to express their opinions about impacts of tourism in different social and economic

¹⁶⁵ King, Pizam, Milman, “Social Impacts of Tourism”, 656.

areas, and although the overall results showed a general positive attitude towards tourism, they were also able to identify specific negative impacts.¹⁶⁶ These were in the areas of alcoholism, narcotics, crime, openness to sex, and traffic conditions.¹⁶⁷

Ankita expressed some concern that politics might stop a further development of the spiritual tourism industry, which she also clearly defines as an expansion of *Buddhist sites*. The issue of commoditisation of religion is also mentioned by Kabita and Gyasten, even though Gyasten meant that issue as of yet was limited to India. Prem's comment regarding people pretending to be monks could also be related to this issue, even though it was most likely a comment about people not being genuine about their religious practice, but rather just 'looking the part'. Prem had a more ideological approach, as he seemed to suggest that if spiritual tourism were to expand in Nepal, more Nepalese people would encounter Buddhism, which could 'make the world a better place'.

Sujan claimed he had learnt much about religion after encountering foreigners, as he wished to be able to answer questions regarding religion when people ask. Ram had a similar reflection during his interview, which he just briefly mentioned: He suggested that people of Nepal should have had more information available to them about Nepal's religious history so they would be able to reply to tourist's questions. He then explained how London's taxi drivers needed to go through a knowledge test about London to be allowed to work, and jokingly said that all Nepalis should go through the same procedure. Even though he probably did not mean that this would actually be accomplishable, both his and Sujan's reflections suggest that they are experiencing a sense of inadequacy in their ability to answer questions about religion in encounters with foreigners.

6.2 Observed encounters in Kathmandu

Living in an area with a high density of spiritual tourists, I observed how they practiced and how they talked about religious topics, but most importantly I witnessed how they interacted with locals. Young Nepalis would often meet up casually in Pashupatinath, the cremation ground, where it was not at all uncommon for young people to spend time in the evenings. There were music, ritual dances with fire, young couples secretly meeting behind old temple buildings, and friends meeting to have a beer in the nearby park. Pashupatinath is a massive temple complex that has a high frequency of visitors every day, both local and foreign, and it is one of the best maintained sites within Kathmandu. Western tourists pay an entrance fee of

¹⁶⁶ King, Pizam, Milman, "Social Impacts of Tourism", 662–663.

¹⁶⁷ King, Pizam, Milman, "Social Impacts of Tourism", 663.

1000 NRs, which is a large sum of money in Nepal, and their money is undoubtedly contributing to the good standard of the complex. Ram talked about how Nepali culture was being preserved and communicated better to tourists than to Nepalis:

Like in Pashupatinath! So many tourists visit there. It is forcing the government to look after it, and other important religious sites. If the tourists didn't come, then they would not take care of it either.

Ram pointing out how the tourists are keeping these sites maintained is worth some extra emphasis. We were talking about *Western spiritual tourists* when he made this comment, however he might have been including other Nepali and Indian tourists when saying that they were providing the financial resources to maintain the site. Neither is this a phenomenon limited to the realm of *spiritual* tourism. These are popular tourist sites regardless of whether or not the tourist has spiritual or religious motivations for visiting.

Observing young people in Pashupatinath join the religious singing and cheer for the dancers made me wonder what *their* motives for participating in these events were. Were they there to celebrate deities through song and dance or was it simply a fun place to hang out with friends? There might of course be several other alternatives – perhaps parents would allow them to go to Pashupatinath in the evenings, rather than letting them go to Thamel and the dance clubs, which serve alcohol and where drug use is openly displayed. Many young Nepalis will approach tourists in Pashupatinath to practice their English while offering to guide them for a few rupees. Maybe there just are not many other good alternative places to meet up with friends, if they do not wish to do so in each other's homes. Regardless of *why* they end up there, they *are* present at a religiously holy site, mingling alongside tourists, where rituals are performed for deities on the stairs next to where people are being cremated. This could undoubtedly engage emotions among those present, and encourage reflections about religious traditions and the message being transmitted through the songs and dances performed. Pashupatinath is very well maintained and one of the most picturesque sites in Kathmandu. Ram's suggestion that they would not have maintained it this well if only Nepalis used it might be exaggerating a little, as many Nepalis donate money for its maintenance, but that young people utilise it more because it looks nice is probably not unlikely. In the case of Bhaktapur, while there was definitely something there before the tourists arrived, the money

provided by their visits has most definitely helped repackage it for sale,¹⁶⁸ and the same is probably true of Pashupatinath as well.



Photo 2: Nora Børø. Evening music ritual at Pashupatinath. Many young adults are gathered around the ritual dancers, clapping and cheering with the music.

Other religious sites throughout Kathmandu are also being used in this way by young people: Swayambhunath, or commonly known as ‘the monkey temple’, is a popular space to go jogging in the mornings up the many steps leading to the main stupa on top of the hill. The numerous modern cafés surrounding the Boudhanath stupa in Boudha are hip places for coffee and continental foods, providing tourists with pizzas and tacos. Pashupatinath, Swayambhunath, and Boudhanath are all main attractions displayed in guidebooks used by visiting tourists, and sites where tourists and young Nepalis interact, or at least observe, each other.

¹⁶⁸ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 43.

6.2 Lay people and religious specialists

One of the things that really caught my attention in Moran's fieldwork was the aspect of the Tibetan laity in relation to the Western Buddhists, practicing more of an elite Buddhism in Boudha. Moran claims that:

'It is now possible that Tibetans watching Westerners watching Tibetans will create an even greater shift in the way in which Buddhism is perceived and practiced by Tibetan laity. (...) Among some young people (...) there may yet be new ways of being a Tibetan Buddhist that have greater affinities with Western Buddhist subjectivities than with traditional Tibetan lay roles.'¹⁶⁹

Moran further suggests that it is likely that 'a greater involvement on the part of lay Tibetans in Buddhist meditative practices (...) will appear'.¹⁷⁰ Although what Moran is describing here relates specifically to young Tibetans in Boudha, I argue that the same might be the case when talking about Nepali, emerging adults, seeing spiritual tourists practicing various religious activities associated with their religious background. Westerners are according to Moran allowed access to an elite discourse of Buddhism via lamas, in a way that lay Tibetans are not.¹⁷¹ Donald Lopez claims in an interview that:

(...) it is generally assumed that meditation is the primary form of Buddhist religious practice. Meditation is certainly presented in this way by contemporary teachers in the West, but historically the practice of meditation has most often been the vocation of a minority of monks and nuns, and was rarely practiced by laypeople.¹⁷²

Young Tibetans '(...) are not mute witnesses or silent mirrors that reflect the gaze of Western Others', Moran argues.¹⁷³ Neither are the Nepali, emerging adult informants. Toffin argues that psychological and religious factors may play determinant roles in provoking change, and that individuals adjust their behaviours 'according not only to their material conditions but also to the image they have of themselves.'¹⁷⁴ Moran argues that what many of the Western Buddhists among his informants are doing is more similar to the practice of religious

¹⁶⁹ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 191.

¹⁷⁰ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 191.

¹⁷¹ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 181.

¹⁷² The Journal of the International Institute, "An interview with Donald Lopez"

¹⁷³ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 158.

¹⁷⁴ Toffin, *From Monarchy to Republic*, 22.

specialists of the respective religion, than it is to the practice of the religion's lay people.¹⁷⁵ This was something I also observed among the spiritual tourists I encountered. They are interested in reading 'the original' texts and in practicing meditation and yoga. This is a practice that was long held apart from the general society, as it was considered a more esoteric practice which required a great deal of knowledge, and it could even be a dangerous pursuit.¹⁷⁶

6.3 'Authenticity' as commodity

When religion enters the global consumer's market, an issue of commoditisation appears.¹⁷⁷ When sites are used both for religious and touristic purposes by locals and visitors, an obvious conflict occurs. Should one make ethical considerations when opening a site to touristic purposes, where locals regularly go to perform to them important religious rituals to touristic purposes? Or can this be a natural part of being a place with religious functions at the same time as being a tourist attraction? An example of this is the temple complex of Pashupatinath, which receives much attention in guidebooks such as the Lonely Planet. 'Holy men' are commonly seen on the banks of the Bagmati river running through Pashupatinath. Sujan made a comment that demonstrates well his awareness regarding these holy men on the cremation ground:

Tourism has commercialised religion in some way or another when you look at it. Especially if you look at the Babas or the Sadhus that are staying there [in Pashupatinath], you know. Now it is part of the business for them, you know, they take dollars! It has commercialised religion in some ways, you know, because there are organisations who dress up the people and they send them over just to get money, you know.

Hindu and Buddhist families go there to cremate a deceased family member or friend, while tourists are on the other side of the river bank taking pictures of the cremation ritual. There are no signs or information restricting tourists from coming close to the rituals, making ordinary Nepali families a part of the product that tourists have paid an entrance fee to see. But there are also many so-called holy men and women in small houses spread around in the temple complex, whom I have observed are often being approached by Western tourists wanting to know more about their religious practice, or are simply just curious and want to

¹⁷⁵ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 140 (mentioned with regards to Tibetan Buddhism).

¹⁷⁶ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 161.

¹⁷⁷ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 90.

know why they do it. If the *holy men* understand English, these will normally reply politely and charge some rupees for the advice in the end.

One of the many examples of zones of exposures between tourists and locals included in Stausberg's 'Religion and Tourism' concerns real life 'authentic' villages in Nepal, where the tourist will be exposed to the daily life of the respective village.¹⁷⁸ The number of times the word *authentic* appears in promotion material aimed at tourists clearly implies that this is a quality the aforementioned group values highly. Spiritual tourists often have high demands of the spiritual industry in Kathmandu, wanting both what they *experience* and what they *buy* to be authentic. It is not uncommon for sellers to make souvenirs look old or worn to increase their value in the souvenir shops. 'The new is made to look old, so that foreigners will want it', one of Moran's informants claimed. Particularly in Boudha, signs outside of shops attract tourists by emphasising that they are selling 'Real Tibetan handicraft', and often times 'Made with ancient Tibetan methods'. Most of the handicrafts are however both made and sold by local Newars and Tamangs, who have been the main suppliers of these materials since the tourists arrived in Boudha.¹⁷⁹

Even though the flow of tourists contributes to turning religion into commodity, many spiritual tourists express some fear of this exact process. Moran writes: '(...) the obvious presence of the 'material' made manifest in objects and cash within a space marked as 'spiritual' is repressed, lamented and contested by some Western Buddhist travellers.'¹⁸⁰ Many spiritual tourists come to Nepal precisely to escape aspects of society such as capitalism and market economies, and are disappointed when finding it to exist within the spiritual realms such as the Buddhist monasteries of Nepal as well. One of Moran's Western informants expressed a disappointment with Nepal, because there was 'too much Western influence', and that he had had different ideas about what Kathmandu would be like,¹⁸¹ perhaps because of representations he had been exposed to before arriving, where the serene and 'unspoilt' nature of Nepal many times are emphasised. Gyasten made an interesting comment about this very phenomenon when asked if spiritual tourists in Nepal could have an impact on Nepalis' religious lives:

No. Not that much. Because we have the belief that originality and authenticity is the one thing that motivates, drags, or interests the tourists to come here to Nepal, right. If we try to adapt or try

¹⁷⁸ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 151.

¹⁷⁹ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 50 and 188.

¹⁸⁰ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 58.

¹⁸¹ Moran, *Buddhism Observed*, 118–119.

to modernize, trying to do something to make the tourists happy, ultimately this area will fall down, right. So the best thing is simplicity (...). I think originality and simplicity and authenticity is the most attractive thing attracting the tourists and the meditator.¹⁸²

Gyasten had worked for several tourist agencies in Nepal and would have had more insight into this field than the other informants. It is interesting how he reflects upon what it is that tourists search for when travelling to Nepal and how the tourism industry should avoid adapting to the tourist's needs, because what they actually want is for Nepal not to change. One of Grieve's informants expressed the same phenomenon as being something profoundly negative to the local community. Having outsiders coming in and viewing Nepalis as part of something 'traditional' and romantic might make Nepalis see themselves differently:

'We used not to know who we were. What kind of us, what kind of we. It took outsiders to tell us that we are antiques and we have lots of culture. When we found this out, something went wrong. When we realized this, we became alienated from ourselves.'¹⁸³

Among Grieve's informants as well, the financial aspects were considered to be the positive impact tourists contributed with, while the cultural footprints were part of a negative trend.¹⁸⁴ 'Tradition' and the 'reproduction of tradition' in the context of a global economy is a valuable commodity, and as Grieve sharply writes: '[I]n Bhaktapur, when one hears the word 'tradition', one reaches for one's wallet.'¹⁸⁵

6.4 Previous encounters registered in research

Religious festivals are examples of occasions that are not just important to the host communities, but are often also listed in travel guides as recommended activities for tourists. An article by Kama Maclean from 2009, presents observation material from the Kumbh Mela festivals, and particularly the presence of media near the religious rituals at the *ghats*. Curious photographers moving too close to the religious rituals lead to a series of conflicts. Maclean asks: 'How did the presence of international media crews affect the festival, and the ways in which people perform their rituals?'¹⁸⁶, and the same question is asked regarding the presence of *tourists*. Unwelcome attention at the bathing ghats may in fact have altered the ways in

¹⁸² Later on in the interview we discussed terms and he made it clear that by 'meditator', which was a word he used several times during the interview, he meant 'people coming to practice meditation'. This signalled clearly that he associated spiritual tourism with people practicing meditation.

¹⁸³ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 33.

¹⁸⁴ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 33.

¹⁸⁵ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 42.

¹⁸⁶ Maclean, "Seeing, Being Seen, and not Being Seen", 319.

which women in particular conduct their ritual bathing, having to try and avoid the gaze of the onlookers.¹⁸⁷ Maclean also describes how what she calls ‘New Age and hippie-style travelers’ behave differently than ‘ordinary’ tourists in the Melas, by attempting to become involved in the rituals, rather than just observing them.¹⁸⁸

As Olsen and Timothy have correctly pointed out, the studies which have emphasised the positive aspects of tourism are largely the ones which have studied its economic impact. Studies which have emphasised tourism’s negative aspects have mostly been those focusing on ‘religious tourism in relation to sites and ceremonies’.¹⁸⁹ An example presented is one from Mount Sinai, where a study found that monks at a nearby monastery complained that the mountain had lost its ‘inviolability’ because it was crowded with hundreds of tourist every night.¹⁹⁰ Another example is a case from the Himalayas, where according to Buddhist monks, the characteristics of religious festivals, dances and rituals, have changed. They claim that this is due to the large number of non-Buddhists present who have little or no understanding of the religious significance of what they are observing, and thus are altering the function of the festivals.¹⁹¹

Michael Stausberg argues that ‘[r]eligion can have effects on tourists, and tourists as much as tourism can have an impact on religions, religious places, performances and people.’¹⁹² He continues with presenting excellent examples of ways in which tourism has altered the use or functions of single elements within religious contexts, such as in rituals and festivals. These changes most commonly include some form of commoditisation of religious elements. He also emphasises how tourism does not only have the power to *change* religious festivals or rituals, but that there are also examples of interested tourists causing ‘ceremonies that were about to die out’ to be reintroduced.¹⁹³

Grieve’s informants talked about the positive impact on the economy of Nepal, left by tourists, but several also complained about the potential negative effect it could have especially on *young people* and their religious practice.¹⁹⁴ Particularly, one of his informants

¹⁸⁷ Maclean, “Seeing, Being Seen, and not Being Seen”, 330.

¹⁸⁸ Maclean, “Seeing, Being Seen, and not Being Seen”, 335.

¹⁸⁹ Timothy & Olsen, *Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys*, 12.

¹⁹⁰ Timothy & Olsen, *Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys*, 13.

¹⁹¹ Timothy & Olsen, *Tourism, Religion & Spiritual Journeys*, 13.

¹⁹² Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 31.

¹⁹³ Stausberg, *Religion and Tourism*, 167.

¹⁹⁴ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 33.

complained that tourists impacted young Nepalis with their ‘bad habits’, with the way they dress, and how they use drugs and drink alcohol.¹⁹⁵

When listing social and cultural impacts of tourism on host communities, Zaei and Zaei mention what they call ‘the demonstration effect’ in encounters between tourists and locals. They claim that this effect ‘may lead to the development of improved lifestyles and practices from the tourists’ examples’¹⁹⁶. I would be extremely careful with naming these potential changes ‘improvements’, and particularly with regards to changes in religious or spiritual practices. In addition, they list ‘[m]ore cultural and social events available for local people such as entertainment, exhibitions etc.’ as a point where tourism can influence a host community.¹⁹⁷ Zaei and Zaei do emphasise how these effects can be ‘positive or negative’, which is why I have chosen to include them, despite of the unfortunate phrasing. Encounters have potentials of impact, both on the side of the host and of the tourist, and the effects of these can have both negative and positive outcomes for both parts.

6.5 Chapter conclusion and summary

All informants showed positive attitudes towards spiritual tourism, but some could, when asked, identify some possible negative aspects. Ankita mentioned a case of political tension, while Ram felt the tourist season could disrupt the religious festivals. The reason mentioned by all informants, except Rin-che, was the economic impact brought about by spiritual tourism, and that the tourism industry would benefit from expanding this sector. Kabita, Ankita and Rin-che were not just positive of the idea of spiritual tourism having an impact on religious trends in Nepal, but even appeared *hopeful* of the idea, saying that if Nepalis were inspired to do more spiritual practices, that could only be positive. The idea that Nepalis could be inspired into doing more spiritual practices either because they see ‘white, rich people’ doing it, or that they start to feel guilty that they have neglected such practices, was evident among several of the informants.

One does not have to actively seek out spiritual activities in Kathmandu to observe its presence. Shops, cafés and restaurants have also adapted to this group of tourists, and call their business by names related to spiritual or religious concepts. This is making the presence of this industry all the more visible and accessible to locals as well as to the tourists.

¹⁹⁵ Grieve, *Retheorizing Religion in Nepal*, 33.

¹⁹⁶ Zaei & Zaei, “The Impacts of Tourism Industry on Host Community”, 15.

¹⁹⁷ Zaei & Zaei, “The Impacts of Tourism Industry on Host Community”, 15.

The contact zone between the informants and spiritual tourism is not very extensive. Only those who have been active in sites frequented by Western spiritual tourists have had extensive contact with these. The rest of the informants have however noticed them enough to use terms such as ‘Buddhists’ or ‘meditators’. It is not unusual for young Nepalis to spend time at religious sites during afternoons, which are sites that are very well maintained, much due to the money flow provided by tourists paying the full entrance fee. These sites provide a contact zone where tourists (spiritual and ‘regular’) if not directly interact, at least observe one another.

Chapter 7: Conclusions and summary

This final chapter of the thesis will provide the summary and conclusions from the analysis of the data material collected during fieldwork in Kathmandu. I shall now review the research questions listed in the first chapter, and systematically conclude their results.

7.1 Returning to the research questions:

I. How are Western spiritual tourists viewed by emerging adults in Kathmandu?

All informants answered that they felt spiritual tourism could only leave positive imprints in Kathmandu, but some could identify negative aspects when pressed further. They were also favourable to the practice of spiritual tourists.

Commoditisation of religion was an issue to some of the informants. They mostly did not express commoditisation as anything negative, but rather emphasised that it was contributing to the conserving of traditions which many young Nepalis had little interest in as of today. It had previously been confusing to the informants watching Westerners practice Asian religious practices, but they expressed that they had gotten used to seeing this after having been exposed to it over several years.

II. How extensive is the contact zone between emerging adults and spiritual tourists in Kathmandu?

The contact zone between the informants and Western spiritual tourists was found to not be very extensive. However, all informants had registered the presence of Western spiritual tourists in Kathmandu, and used terms as ‘meditators’ or ‘Buddhists’ when referring to these. This suggests that they had not just registered their presence, but they had also understood what the majority of them are there to accomplish. Some of the informants had extensive contact with these tourists, both in Kathmandu and abroad. From observations in Kathmandu, centres offering services to tourists are highly visible and promote their services through pamphlets that are placed in cafés and restaurants. Some Nepalis also attend courses in such centres.

Sites such as Pashupatinath, Swayambunath, and Boudhanath are important sites for encounters between young Nepalis and spiritual tourists. The money extracted from entrance fees Western tourists pay, helps maintain these sites, and make them attractive locations for young Nepalis to spend their free time.

III. Can spiritual tourism have an impact on religious or spiritual trends among Nepali, emerging adults in Kathmandu?

Smith, Jensen Arnett, and Liechty all argue that emerging adults are in a stage of their lives where massive changes are bound to occur. Smith suggests six categories to describe ways in which emerging adults in the USA make decisions regarding their spiritual or religious lives. Two of these categories described the religious lives of six of my informants very accurately. Those conformed to the ‘Selective Adherents’ and the ‘Spiritually Open’.¹⁹⁸ Adherents from both of these categories are very receptive to changes in their religious lives,¹⁹⁹ and this may make them more susceptible to adapting their religious practices or beliefs to what is happening around them.

Spiritual tourists from Western countries typically bring with them, or seek out at arrival in Kathmandu, a ‘decontextualised religious practice’. This entails that practices which originated within certain Asian religious contexts have been decontextualised and utilised as partial elements, resonating with different cultures and discourses in the West.²⁰⁰ Spiritual tourism is providing a market in Kathmandu which had previously not been available in such a manner, where any lay person can join in meditation, yoga, or other practices. Not many Nepalis use these centres, but the informants who had not yet participated all claimed an interest in doing so. Kabita and Ankita were both practicing yoga and meditation daily. There seemed to be a tendency in Kathmandu where yoga and meditation are parts of a popular trend that does not only involve tourists, but locals as well.

All informants emphasised the importance of scriptural knowledge, which is also a typical trait amongst spiritual tourists. Moran found that young Tibetans in Kathmandu were increasingly more engaged with contemporary English-language Buddhist texts. Several informants expressed not only a positive attitude, but even seemed hopeful of an impact on Nepalis by spiritual tourism. Rin-che suggested that seeing Westerners dressed as Buddhist monks could both shock and inspire Nepalis to want to better practice their religion. There are currently signs of a Buddhist revival in Nepal, both according to the interviewed khenpo, and several other researchers. The presence of spiritual tourists seeking out Buddhist practices could further increase this trend.

¹⁹⁸ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167.

¹⁹⁹ Smith, *Souls in Transition*, 167.

²⁰⁰ Schedneck, “The decontextualization of Religious Practice”, 37.

Contact with foreigners who had asked questions about religion had made both Modan and Sujana more interested in this topic. Increased awareness about a subject may cause one to pay more attention to it. As such, spiritual tourism might influence emerging adults in Nepal to seek out such practices or ask questions regarding them. It may stimulate or encourage increased activity in centres offering religious or spiritual practices. The distance created between the culture of the emerging adults and that of their parents caused mainly by radical changes occurring in Kathmandu, which then could direct the emerging adults to feel alienated from both the old and the new culture. This could evoke feelings of nostalgia and a fear of a loss of tradition,²⁰¹ and might cause emerging adults to seek their parents' traditions, or discover new, available ones.

7.2 Final reflections and further research

The extent to which Western spiritual tourists and Nepali, emerging adults encounter each other varies among my informants, and the same is most likely the case among emerging adults in Kathmandu in general. Those Nepalis who live in or spend time in areas with a high density of spiritual tourists, such as in Boudha, are likely to have a more extensive contact zone, and thus be more exposed to trends among the spiritual tourists. Most of the data suggest that there is little evidence of there being an impact on the religious or spiritual *practice* among the informants, but rather on general trends and ideas about religion and spirituality, particularly with respect to *Buddhist* teachings.

For further research into this field, it would be very interesting to study the generation that came prior to these emerging adults. How have the parents of my informants, and others, made decisions regarding the introduction of religiosity in the upbringing of their children?

With the extent of spiritual tourism increasing worldwide, the tourists' ability to influence their surroundings warrants research outside of Kathmandu. It would be highly valuable to see studies similar to this one, conducted in other sites where spiritual tourism is present and active.

²⁰¹ Schedneck, "The Decontextualization of Religious Practice".

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Appendix

INTERVIEW GUIDE

(Prior to the interview, all informants must be informed about their anonymity and their right to withdraw their participation at any time)

1. Informant's background. Age, location, studies, religion and family religion.
Religious/spiritual? Which term do you prefer? Use this throughout the interview.
2. Are you yourself [religious]? If yes – how do you practice [your religion]?
 - From where do you get your knowledge about [religious] traditions?
 - How do you imagine that your parents practiced [religious traditions] when they were your age?
 - If you later have/or already have, children, how would you treat the topic of [religion] with them?
3. Parent's view of your [religious] practice, is this something you would discuss with them?
4. Hinduism and Buddhism – do you view them as two separate traditions?
 - Could you define what Buddhism is, in your understanding?
5. [Western 'spiritual' tourists, which term do you prefer?] Have you had any contact with these?
6. Have you ever tried yoga or meditation?
7. What do you think about these tourists?
8. Do you think [spiritual] tourism can *have an impact* on young Nepalis' [religious] practice in Kathmandu?
 - Positive or negative impact?
9. Is there anything else I should add that I might not have thought of asking about this topic?